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OR,

A Man of Honor.

BY MAJOR DANIEL BOONE DUMONT,
AUTHOR OF "COLONEL DOUBLE-EDGE," "SILVER
SAM, DETECTIVE," "THE WHITE
CROOK," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

A FALSE FRIEND.

At a time when Cincinnati was not near the metropolis it now is, though still a big, bustling, thriving and populous city, one of the prettiest places in the suburbs was a small but very nice house that "stood in its own grounds," as the English say.

That is to say, it was surrounded by an ornamental yard, filled with flowering plants and shrubs, and so neatly kept that it attracted the notice and admiration of the passers-by; who were wont to envy the owner, and were sure that the pretty house must be the abode of peace and plenty, of love and happiness.

So it was on the bright June morning that

A QUICK AND POWERFUL BLOW DID THE WORK, AND THE YOUTH, WITH A FAINT CRY,
FELL BACKWARD AND WAS SWALLOWED UP BY THE MISSISSIPPI.

witnesses the opening of this story—or, rather, of the incident that furnishes its prologue.

"Holcomb" was the name on the silver plate that adorned the front door, and Josiah Holcomb was the owner of the house, whose usual occupants were his wife and two children, with two female servants, one of whom was a nurse-girl.

There they had lived for nearly five years, and in that part of the city there was not a more pleasant, respectable and apparently prosperous family.

Mrs. Holcomb, a bright and attractive young woman from the interior of Ohio, was not only known as a model wife and mother, but was a member in good standing of the Presbyterian church near by, attending all the services with conspicuous regularity, and taking a great interest in all the work of the church.

Though her husband was not a member, he was seen there with her occasionally when he happened to spend a Sunday in town, and his conduct and demeanor were always most exemplary.

His business, as he informed his wife and she informed the neighbors, was that of a dealer in produce, and it was of such a nature as compelled frequent and long absences, so that Mr. Holcomb, as a rule, was away from home.

He had no office in the city, and his name was not in the Business Directory; but he was in the habit, as he said, of purchasing produce in the country round about, accompanying his shipments to New Orleans, and bringing back return freights of sugar and other Southern staples.

Mrs. Holcomb would have preferred that his occupation should keep him at home, or allow him more time there; but it was profitable, and she had all that she could reasonably desire, and she was devoted to her children, and her husband was a kind man of good habits, and under these circumstances it was easy to be satisfied.

The visitors at the pretty home were mostly Mrs. Holcomb's acquaintances, as her husband seemed to have few friends; but occasionally he brought a guest to the house, and the one who came there the most frequently was Mr. James Hannafin.

He was a few years younger than Josiah Holcomb, and not so gentlemanly in appearance and manner, there being a suspicion of "loudness" about his dress and general style which was quickly perceived by the alert intelligence of Mrs. Holcomb, though she always treated him well as her husband's special friend.

It was Mr. James Hannafin who came sauntering up the street alone that bright June morning, with a bit of a swagger that was habitual with him, stopped at the pretty house and rung the front door-bell.

Mrs. Holcomb had caught sight of him as he came up the street, from her seat at an up-stairs front window; but she did not go to the door to let him in.

She merely "primed" a little before a glass, as women will do from a natural desire to look their best, and went down to the parlor to receive him after the nurse-girl had answered the bell.

In the parlor she noticed, as she had often done before, and with the same silent disapproval, certain points about this visitor which were objectionable to her.

His mustache was somewhat too long and pointed to suit her severe taste; the colors of his necktie were a little too gaudy; his watch-chain was rather heavier than it should have been; he persisted in wearing a spring overcoat though the weather was warm, and shoes that were varnished instead of blacked; she did not admire the style of his plaid trousers, and his voice had not the mild and gentlemanly intonations of her husband's.

But there was really nothing about him for anybody but a too critical person to find fault with, though he had seated himself before he was invited to do so, and had placed his hat on a table instead of holding it in his hand.

"I hope that you and the children are well," he said in response to her salutation.

"Quite well, I thank you."

"I looked in to ask if Mr. Holcomb has got back."

"Indeed, no. I do not expect him for several days yet."

"He is away from home a great deal."

"A great deal, as you say, Mr. Hannafin. I used to worry about that, but have become quite reconciled to it, as his business requires it."

"Yes, there is no doubt that his business does require it. It couldn't be carried on any other way. But did it never strike you that it must be a queer sort of business that keeps a man away from home so much?"

Mrs. Holcomb colored a little. There was something in this visitor's tone and air which indicated a purpose that might prove to be hostile.

"Not at all," she answered. "The business in which he is engaged compels him to make frequent visits to New Orleans."

"Other men who buy and sell in New Orleans don't have to be going to and from there all the time."

"I know nothing about that; but I know what Mr. Holcomb has to do, and his explanations have always been perfectly satisfactory to me. He has gone down the river now in charge of a large shipment of bacon."

"Bacon is a queer name for it," observed Hannafin with a sneer.

There could no longer be a doubt that the visitor had some malign object in view, to which his talk was gradually leading up.

"What do you mean by that, sir?" demanded Mrs. Holcomb.

"If he had said lambs or suckers, he would have come nearer the truth."

"I ask you again, Mr. Hannafin, what do you mean by that?"

"Is it possible, Mrs. Holcomb, that in all the time you have lived with your husband you have never known what his business really was? Of course you haven't, though. You church people never think of anything of that sort, and so Holcomb has told me again and again that he has kept the thing covered from you as close as close can be. But it is time that the truth should be known. If you don't learn it now, you may find it out when it will be much worse for you, and I think I am doing you a favor in coming here to tell you what the business really is that keeps your husband away from home so much."

Surely some terrible revelation was to be made, and Mrs. Holcomb mentally braced herself to receive it.

What could it be, and why had that man come there to afflict her with it?

Was he going to say that her husband was by profession a burglar, a river pirate, a forger, or what?

The revelation was bound to be made, and the sooner the better; so she invited it.

"What is his business, Mr. Hannafin?" she asked with as much of an air of unconcern as she could assume.

Jim Hannafin had no doubt come there with the purpose of telling the exact truth, but at the same time of putting it in as hard a shape and as bad a light as he could give it.

"Your husband," said he, "is a professional gambler. That is his business, and he has no other, and never had any other. Since he was nineteen years old he has played cards for a living, and has never had a dollar but what he has got hold of in that way. He is known as one of the sharpest gamblers on the river, too, and there's no man who can beat him at getting hold of other folks' money. You say that he has gone to New Orleans with a shipment of bacon; but the fact is that for the past three weeks he has been running a faro bank in Cairo, and a dead open and shut game it is, as I well know."

This was indeed a terrible revelation to the lady, considering who and what she was, and it was no wonder that her voice as well as her hands trembled as she answered.

"Your statements are news to me," she said, and I must admit that I had never suspected anything of the kind. As it is, I have only your word against that of my husband, whom I have always believed to be a gentleman and a man of honor. How am I to know that you are telling me the truth?"

"You will believe what your husband says, I suppose, and of course you know his writing. You may read this."

Jim Hannafin handed the lady a letter which she took from its opened envelope and read carefully, her face pale and her voice lowered. It was in these words:

"MY DEAR JIM:—

"I am sorry that I could not let you into this Cairo snap as we had agreed to; but you failed to come to time, and I had to take in a man who was willing to risk his money with me. I am running a great game here, and there is money in it as long as the authorities let me alone."

"I can put you on a good thing, though. A hayseed delegation is to go from Indiana, to a trade convention at Memphis, leaving Evansville by boat on the 14th. You can pass yourself off as a Cincinnati business man and work those suckers for all they are worth."

"Wishing you the best of luck, I am as ever,

Your friend,

"J. HOLCOMB."

"I suppose that you are also a gambler," suggested the lady as she handed the letter back to her visitor.

"Yes, ma'am. That's the way I make my living. I haven't been in the business as long as your husband has, and I don't claim to be such a double-edged sharp as he is; but I can hold my own."

"Does it seem to you that you are doing the right thing in coming here to expose your friend and comrade where you know he would most object to being exposed?"

"Of course it is right. He deserves that, and more. Don't his letter tell you how he went back on me?"

"He says it was your fault."

"He lies! Oh! he's a success as a liar, as I reckon you know by this time. He broke his word, and went back on me because he thought he could make more money by taking in another man, and that's the sum and substance of it. He cut me out of a good thing, and what could he expect me to do? Besides, Mrs. Holcomb,

it was my duty to expose the fraud he has been playing."

"Your duty?" inquired the lady, as she elevated her eyebrows. "I should not suppose that you would be much worried by considerations of duty. If you fancy that you have done me a favor—though I doubt if you fancy anything of the kind—you are mistaken. Perhaps it was right that I should know what you have told me, but I do not thank you for telling it. The bearer of bad news is never welcome, and I wish you good-morning."

"But, Mrs. Holcomb—"

"Good-morning, sir. You need not trouble yourself to call again."

Jim Hannafin went away, looking as if he had in some way been cheated out of something, and even before he had got out of the house the lady sunk into a chair, a picture of anguish and utter misery.

She did not weep, but was fearfully pale, and held her head with her hands as if it was in danger of bursting.

After a while she rose, her handsome features hardened by a sad and determined expression, and thereafter there was a bustle of packing in the house, which lasted until a late hour in the afternoon, when Mrs. Holcomb went away in a carriage with her two children and their nurse.

"I have received news that compels me to go into the country for a few days," she said to the other servant. "I leave the house in your charge. If Mr. Holcomb should come home while I am gone, tell him that there is a letter for him in my room."

So she went away, and she never saw the inside of that pretty house again.

CHAPTER II.

PAYING HIM OFF.

Two days after Mrs. Holcomb had left her home there came up the quiet and pleasant street a young man, who stopped at the pretty house as if he belonged there.

His appearance surely indicated that he belonged there, as his dress and manners were evidently those of a gentleman.

It was easy to see that he was disappointed when the door was opened by the servant, and there was also something in her look that troubled him.

"Are all well?" he asked, quickly.

"All well, but nobody at home," was the brief answer.

"Where is Mrs. Holcomb?"

"She went away two days ago with the children and the nurse."

"That is strange. Anything the matter?"

"She said she had got some news that would take her into the country for a few days, and told me to tell you that you would find a letter in her room."

"Perhaps some of her people are sick."

Josiah Holcomb hurried up-stairs to his wife's room, wondering what news it could be that had carried her off into the country, as nothing of the kind had ever happened before.

As soon as he stepped into the room he noticed that several articles which he had been accustomed to see, were missing; but there was nothing in that except an indication that her stay might possibly be protracted beyond a few days.

He easily found the letter, as she had stuck it, woman-fashion, between the glass and frame of the mirror, and he tore it open and started to read it hastily.

He may have glanced over it hastily; but thereafter he read it over very slowly, pausing here and there to take in its full meaning, and as he read his face became ashy pale, and the hand that held the letter trembled visibly.

This is the wording of the letter that moved him so:

"I am sorry to say that I have found you out. I know that you married me under false pretenses, and that your entire life with me has been a fraud and a false pretense. That might be forgiven, if you were not what you are; but I know that you are a gambler, that you have always been a gambler, and that all the money that has supported your family has been the wages of infamy. I suppose I would have continued to live in a fool's paradise if I had not learned this disgraceful truth; but I must have learned it sooner or later. I know it now, and that knowledge ends all between us. I cannot be the wife of a gambler, and cannot suffer my children to grow up as the children of a gambler. My duty as a Christian and a mother would allow no such sacrifice. As soon as I learned the shameful truth, there was but one thing for me to do, and that I have done. You will never see us again, as I shall put more than distance between you and those whom you have so foully deceived. Farewell, and may God have mercy on you and show you the error of your ways."

He stood while he read the letter so carefully and so slowly; but, when the last words had sunk into his soul, the paper fell to the floor and he dropped upon a chair.

Then his strong and manly frame shook with emotion, and tears—real tears—streamed from his eyes and wet the hands that covered them.

This lasted but a few moments, and he rose and carefully folded the letter, while a hard and

set look came into his face, like that which his wife's features had worn in the room below.

"I had thought better of her than that," he muttered, bitterly; "but her head is too strong for her heart, and she lets the head do the talk and the work. She is too good to be generous, too righteous to be just. As a Christian and a mother she can't sacrifice herself, and so she sacrifices me and the children. That strikes me as being a queer sort of Christianity, to say nothing of the other thing. Well, she means what she says. She always did—except when she said that she would stick to me through better and worse. The first thing now is to find out who has done this."

He went down-stairs, pale and hard, but without a tremble in his step or voice, and interviewed the servant.

"Who was here, Mary, the day Mrs. Holcomb went away?"

"Just one visitor, sir. It was a gentleman, a friend of yours. What's his name, now? I ought to know it, as he's been here often. Hannafin, sir—that's it."

Josiah Holcomb's brows contracted, and such a wicked look came into his face as made Mary shrink from him; but he spoke to her kindly and mildly.

"It may be some time, Mary, before Mrs. Holcomb gets back, and I am going away, too. I will leave the house in your charge for a while, and will send you word what to do."

He gave her some money and went away, leaving her to wonder what had happened to disturb that peaceful family.

If she could have seen Josiah Holcomb's face as he went down the street, she would have been sure that it was something terrible.

He had lost the look of the bright, cheerful and gentlemanly man who had so gayly stepped up to the door of the pretty suburban house, and in its place was a dark expression of murderous hate, such as would have caused a passer-by to shudder and give him a wide berth.

"So it was Jim Hannafin," he muttered, "who did me this favor, who exploded that dynamite under my house. I expected some dirty trick from him, but nothing like as bad as that. He has done his worst, but it is my turn now. The last line of her letter was like the last words of a judge's sentence—to be hanged by the neck until you are dead, and may God have mercy on your soul! This is as bad as a hanging for me, but I'll deserve the hanging before I am swung off. The first thing is to find that sneaking scoundrel, and he ought to have known better than to get me started on his trail. I will find him where I want him, and that end of the business will be settled."

He did find him and there was no time lost in the search and the discovery.

The night of that very day two men met in a grove on the Kentucky side of the river below Covington.

One of the men was Josiah Holcomb, and the other was the man who had exploded the dynamite that destroyed his home.

To the latter the meeting was as unexpected as it was unwelcome, as he was on his way to the house of his wife, and Josiah Holcomb was the last man whom he would have supposed he might meet there.

By the former the meeting had been premeditated and planned, happening exactly as he had intended it should.

Jim Hannafin soon got over his shock of surprise and consternation, and made a strong effort to smile as he advanced and held out his hand.

The offer of the hand was not noticed; but Hannafin was in no hurry to take offense.

"You are the last man I would have thought of meeting over here," said he. "What brought you into this neck o' woods?"

"I came to find you," coldly answered Holcomb.

"I am easy to find as a general thing. Did you want to see me about that game you are running at Cairo?"

"No—I came to play out the game that you opened at my house two days ago."

Jim Hannafin had known as soon as he saw Holcomb's hard and determined look why his former friend and partner had sought him, and this statement was not unexpected; but it disconcerted him so that he could not meet the steady gaze of the other.

"Hope there's no harm done," he muttered. "Did your wife tell you that I had split on you?"

"I have no wife. You have driven her from me, and she is lost to me forever. It would have been more merciful in you to shoot me dead than to do that deed."

This was indeed a serious matter, and it may be put down to the credit of Jim Hannafin that he was shocked as well as startled when he began to perceive the extent of the damage he had done.

"Is it so bad as that?" he feebly inquired. "It can't be. You are only trying to give me a setting down for meddling with your affairs. But I meant no harm. I thought I would play a rather too practical joke on you, and at the same time do you a service. She was sure to find out the style of your business some

time, you know, and it seemed to me that I had better break it to her gently and save you from trouble hereafter."

"You lie, Jim Hannafin. You had no thought of pleasing her or helping me. You did that thing out of pure spite and malice, to be revenged on me for leaving you out of that down-river snap."

There could be no doubt that it was a serious matter; but the controversy might not go beyond words, and in that style of warfare Jim Hannafin considered himself a match for his antagonist.

"If you take it in that way," he observed in as careless a tone as he could assume, "and if you don't care to listen to any of my explanations, there is nothing more to be said."

"But there is something to be done," savagely responded Holcomb. "Why do you suppose I have sought you on this side of the river, and have met you at this time and place? Jim Hannafin, I have come here to kill you."

Most decidedly it was a serious business, a scrape that there was no getting out of. In size and strength the adversaries were nearly equally matched, though Hannafin was a little the taller and heavier of the two; but of course the difficulty was not to be settled with bare knuckles.

"If that is your aim," said Hannafin, "I suppose you can murder me if you want to. Of course you have come fixed, and I am unarmed."

"I mean to give you a chance for your life," answered Holcomb, as he produced two revolvers, "and I have here the tools for both. One of us will not leave this ground alive!"

"You mean a duel, then. What sort of a fight do you propose?"

"Take this revolver. We will stand back to back here, and each will step off ten paces, and halt. I will give the word, and at the word each will cock his pistol, and we will turn and fire, advancing and firing as we please."

"Very well," said Hannafin, as he took the revolver. "I don't want to fight you, and if anything happens to you here, it will be what you bring on yourself."

"I don't care for my life; but I mean to have yours."

It was a good night for such an encounter. Though the trees were thick, the moon was shining in an unclouded sky, giving plenty of light, that was rendered a little uncertain by the capricious shadows.

The two men placed themselves back to back, and began to step off the distance in the direction that Holcomb had pointed out.

He must have known that the plan he had proposed, taking the antagonists out of sight of each other and leaving each to act in a measure independently, would give a fine opportunity for breaking the terms of the combat and gaining an advantage by treachery.

Of course Hannafin knew this, too, and he had an incentive to unfair dealing in his adversary's statement that he meant to have his life.

Holcomb, however, had stipulated that no revolver should be cocked until the distance was measured and the word given, and he was very quick of hearing.

Half the paces had not been stepped off when he caught the faint click of the lock of Hannafin's pistol, and he knew what that meant.

He turned instantly. There was his adversary facing him, and a loud report was followed by the whiz of a bullet near his head.

His own revolver spoke at once, and his aim was so deadly that Jim Hannafin fell backward, shot through the heart.

Holcomb stood near the body of his false friend until he was sure that he was quite dead, and then turned away, leaving there the revolver that he had handed him.

"They may call it a suicide or what they please," said he. "It is nothing to me what they call it, as that account is settled. He was a coward and a scoundrel to the last, and the world is well rid of him."

Before the week was ended the pretty suburban house and all it contained had passed into other hands, and the places that had known Josiah Holcomb knew him no more.

CHAPTER III.

ON BOARD THE ROWENA.

THE fine passenger-steamer Rowena rounded to on signal at a little landing on the Indiana side of the Ohio, below Evansville, and the captain was inclined to be wrathful when he perceived that the only outcome of the stoppage was one passenger.

As the Rowena was one of the best boats that plied between Louisville and New Orleans, there was a good deal of style about her, and it was bad enough to have to stop at such a beggarly landing, and worse yet to receive there only one passenger, who was an undoubted "gray."

He was a Gray by name as well as by nature, registering at the clerk's office as "Benjamin Gray, Hoopville, Indiana," and in appearance

and manner he was decidedly a "gray," being an elderly man, or at least past middle age, his dark hair tinged with gray, and with gray streaks in his black mustache and bushy beard.

His clothing was of gray homespun, cut in rural style, or lack of style, and fitting him loosely; his high collar, almost innocent of starch, lopped over at one side; his hat was a soft felt of no particular shape, and his boots were coarse and roomy.

Yet he had a self-important air, such as might indicate an independent position and the possession of property, and this was made more plainly visible to all who saw him slap down a big, fat-looking wallet on the clerk's counter, directing that it be placed in the safe to await his order.

"I reckon I kin take keer o' myself as well as anybody," said he, "but when it's jest as easy to be on the safe side, I allus go thar and stay thar."

Then he deposited his countrified carpet-bag in the state-room that had been assigned to him, and sauntered out into the cabin to look about.

The Social Hall—the name given to the forward part of the cabin adjacent to the clerk's office and the bar—was pretty well filled with drinkers and smokers and loungers; but only two of the card tables were occupied, as it was too early in the evening for any extensive games.

There were men enough to play them, men who might drop into or be drawn into them as the night advanced, though steamboat passengers were not then as ready to stake houses and lands as they had been in former days, and among them were several whom an experienced observer might readily have recognized as professional gamblers who traveled on the boats for the purpose of getting hold of other people's money through the medium of so-called games of chance.

At one of the tables that have been mentioned were seated four men who were playing "seven up," without any money stakes; the other was occupied by two of the professional gamblers and a victim.

There could be no doubt that the third person was a victim, as his appearance and the progress of the game plainly pointed him out to anybody who was acquainted with such matters as a pigeon in process of being plucked.

He seemed to be hardly out of his teens, and was a well-dressed, handsome, dark-haired young man, whose face showed signs of early dissipation.

The game was poker, of course, and money was being freely staked by the young man and liberally absorbed by the others, who, while pretending to be opponents, were really playing into each other's hands.

No doubt they were cheating; but the eyes of bystanders were on the game, and their underhand work was done so finely that it was a matter of inference rather than of proof.

This condition of affairs was evident to everybody who took any interest in the game, with the single exception of the victim, and he was destroying his chances, if he might be supposed to have any chances, by too frequent communication with the bar.

The pluckers of the pigeon were in no wise behind him in their willingness to drink—in fact, they assisted and encouraged him in putting the enemy into his mouth—but their seasoned stomachs and cool heads were not worried by what they drank, while he became momentarily hotter and more excited, playing wildly, and betting with a headstrong and utterly unreasonable recklessness.

Of course they would have won in any event; but his excitement enabled them to pluck him more speedily and more thoroughly.

Benjamin Gray of Hoopville was watching this interesting and exasperating game, but was not watching it closely, his attention being frequently drawn off to other people and other happenings in and about the cabin.

Especially was his keen and wary glance turned toward the after part of the cabin, which was sacred to the lady passengers, and in that direction there was something worth looking at.

A young lady in that part of the boat not only turned her face toward the Social Hall, but occasionally left her seat and sauntered down the cabin, walking and looking as if some trouble was oppressing her.

It was evident to Benjamin Gray, as it must have been to all who observed her, that there was a strong family likeness between her and the young victim at the poker game.

She had dark hair and eyes as he had, and her brunette face was highly attractive in features and color and expression, and she was handsomely dressed and appeared to be a year or so older than he.

Brother and sister, one would have thought, and the inference would naturally arise that the sister was distressed by her brother's proceedings at the card-table.

Clearly this was the case, as after a while she spoke to one of the colored servants, who, after a brief hesitation, carried her message to the young man in the Social Hall.

"Miss Talcott wants to speak to you, sah."

An expression of intense annoyance came over the young man's face, and he threw down the cards that he was to deal.

He possessed one good point, however—he was not so far gone in any kind of dissipation as to neglect his sister or disregard her wishes.

Though he had been drinking heavily and was deeply absorbed in the game, he rose from his seat almost immediately, though a little unsteadily.

"I am sorry to leave you, gentlemen," said he; "but my sister wants me, and I must go to her."

The man who sat opposite to him said nothing; but a sneer expressed what he might have said, and the sneer did not escape the notice of young Talcott.

"As I am a heavy loser," he remarked, rather hotly, "I have a right to quit the game if I choose; but I will return soon, if you care to keep the place open for me."

Surely they did care to, and a smile took the place of a sneer on the face of his principal opponent.

"I'll play the hand while you're gone, if you say so," observed Benjamin Gray.

"I am willing," answered Talcott, "if these gentlemen have no objection."

No objection was made, and the "gray" slipped into the seat which the young gentleman had vacated, while the latter went back to the ladies' cabin.

"Do you understand this game, stranger?" inquired the gambler who faced the new-comer.

"Jest you let old Ben Gray alone for not tacklin' anythin' he don't understand. This yere's poker, ain't it? Well, I've played a sight of it up in Posey county, though seven-up is what we mostly do stick to as a stiddy game."

"All right, Mr. Gray. Glad to know you. This gentleman is Mark Hannafin, of Cincinnati, and I am Silas Birch, of Louisville. The young fellow whose place you took is Gerald Talcott, of Louisiana. Now you know each other, and all's straight. It's your deal, my friend."

"That suits me. You fellers is smart enough, I know; but you'll have to git up 'arly in the mornin' to beat your Uncle Benjamin at this yere game."

No empty boast was this, as the sequel speedily showed.

Ben Gray, picking up the pack, shuffled and dealt the cards, and a decided change in the game was manifest from the start.

The luck, or whatever it was, which had enabled the professional gamblers to win the money of their victim so easily, had entirely deserted them, and their utmost efforts could not induce it to return.

In vain they brought into play various tricks and schemes that are supposed to be peculiar to professional gamblers, as at every step they were met and foiled by Ben Gray, and more than once the twinkle of his keen eyes warned them that he had detected them in their attempts at foul play.

There was nothing for them to do but submit to the loss of their money or quit the game, and the latter alternative was of course out of the question, as it involved a confession of defeat.

Gerald Talcott did not return to the card-table immediately, or very soon, as his sister detained him in an earnest conversation, though sorely against his will.

"I sent for you, Gerald," said she, "because I wanted you to quit playing cards down there. I know it was a gambling game that you were in, and I see that you have been drinking, too."

"You are right about that, Eva," frankly answered the young man. "I did not want to quit when you sent for me, because it would look like showing the white feather; but I admit that I have lost some money."

"How could you help losing money, when you were playing with professional gamblers?"

"How do you know that they were professional gamblers, my sharp little sis?"

"It is easy to see that they are not gentlemen."

"I don't know about that. It is hard to say who is or is not a gentleman. One of them may have been a gambler by trade—the man who won most of the money; but the other surely cannot have had anything to do with that man, for he lost as well as I did."

"Do you mean Mr. Hannafin?"

"Yes, Eva. How did you know his name? What do you know about him?"

"He was on the boat when I came up to meet you, and I saw more of him than I wanted to, though I was under the special care of the captain, and he showed me some attention that was unwelcome, to say the least of it."

"I must see about that. He had better not try it again."

"Do not trouble yourself, Gerald. If he had really annoyed me, I would have complained against him, and I think he will keep away from me now."

"Perhaps he has come down on this boat for the purpose of following you."

"Possibly; but it is more likely that he is merely plying his trade, as I believe him to be a river gambler. What I want you to do, Gerald, dear, is to leave the cards alone while you

are on this boat, and to be very careful how you touch liquor, if you must touch it at all. Mother is very anxious about us both, and I promised her that I would bring you home in the best possible shape. You know, too, how much depends on you, and I am going to rely on you to do just what I tell you to do, until we are safe at home."

"You may rely on me, sis. I would be nothing less than a brute if I should go wrong when I have you to look after. I will leave the cards alone, and will keep away from the bar."

After a little further conversation, Gerald Talcott left his seat.

"Where are you going now?" inquired his sister.

"Out yonder, but not to play or to drink. I want to watch the two men who were playing with me, and to see how they get on with the old chap who took my place."

"I trust you, Gerald."

CHAPTER IV.

THE BITER BIT.

WHEN Gerald Talcott returned to the card-table, which he had lately left, the progress of the game had become so unsatisfactory to Silas Birch and Mark Hannafin, that they would gladly have ended it if they could have found a decent excuse for doing so.

The return of Talcott seemed to afford a pretext, and Birch hastened to take advantage of the opening.

"I am glad to see that your sister let you come back here," he said, with a sneer that was scarcely suppressed. "Are you ready to take your place?"

"Not to-night," pleasantly answered the young man. "My sister objects to my playing cards for money."

"That's what's the matter, hey? And of course you mind her. What a good boy you are!"

"One of the best kind of boys when I take a notion to be good, and when I take a notion to be bad I am one of the worst. Remember that as you go along."

Whether this statement was or was not intended as a threat, it had the effect of quieting the gambler's tongue and subduing his sneer.

"If you fellers are tired of me," observed Ben Gray, "I'm ready to drop out, as I reckon I've won as much money as you got out o' that young feller. But I'd like to have jest one more deal around, to give you satisfaction."

It was agreed that there should be one more deal around, and again a change was manifest in the course of the game.

On Hannafin's deal and Birch's the old man lost, and on his own deal, which was the last of the round, the cards seemed to run against him, to judge by Birch's triumphant glance when he had filled his hand, and by the despondent look of the dealer.

Hannafin passed out, but the old man hung on, and the betting became brisk between him and Birch.

When there was considerably more than enough money on the board to cover his recent losses, the old man called, and his antagonist laid down a king full.

Ben Gray promptly responded with an ace full, and covered the stakes with his broad hand.

"Drop that!" fiercely ordered Birch. "The money is mine."

"I don't seem to see it in that light, Mr. Birch."

"Look at it in this light, then!" exclaimed the gambler as he drew and levelled a revolver. The money is mine because you have been cheating. I saw you palm that ace of clubs."

"I don't deny it," calmly answered the old man, without removing his hand from the money. "But I had a right to do it. You have been cheating and trying to cheat all through the game. I had to fight you with your own weapons."

"Drop that, I say, or I will bore a hole through your head!"

A small but sinewy hand seized the gambler's collar, and Gerald Talcott, who was standing behind his chair bent down and whispered to him.

"Put up that pistol, or I will drive my knife into your neck!"

This admonition was accompanied by a touch of cold steel against the gambler's skin, and it was not the only thing that made him hesitate.

"The old man is right," said one of the seven-up players, who had quit their table and come to the other. "I've been watching these deals, and it's just as he says. He has only beat you at your own game, stranger, and everybody will admit that he had a right to do that."

This was clearly the opinion of the majority, as expressed by remarks to that effect and by a general murmur of assent, and Silas Birch submitted with an ill grace.

As you seem to be running this game, gentlemen, I will have to give in; but it is nothing less than highway robbery for a man to carry off that money on a clear swindle."

Ben Gray, who had quietly pocketed the stakes, did not seem to be in the least aggrieved by this statement.

Gerald Talcott went back to the ladies' cabin, and the old man after a little pause followed him thither.

Silas Birch and Mark Hannafin walked out on the forward guards, out of sight and hearing of the others.

"Have you gone back on me, Mark?" grumbled the elder man. "I never knew anybody to throw off on me worse than you have done to-night. You not only made me do all the playing, but when a pinch came you refused to stand up to me, and acted as if I was an utter stranger to you. Is that the way to back up your partner? What's the matter with you?"

"You know well enough what the matter is," answered Hannafin. "You know that you have been doing just what I wanted you not to do. What sort of a chance do you suppose I can have with Miss Talcott unless I get on the right side of her brother?"

"Oh, bother the girl!"

"You are more likely to bother me than to bother her. She is the daughter of Colonel Talcott, who died last year, leaving a big pile of property to his two children, and I thought I had made some way with her when I came up on the Memphis. I wanted to improve my opportunities on this boat, and might do so if you would help me, instead of hurting me."

"How have I been hurting you?"

"I told you that I was going to propose a game to that brother of hers, so as to get better acquainted with him, and that it must be a straight and gentlemanly game, with the chances in his favor, as I could afford to lose a little money for the sake of getting on the right side of him. Instead of that, you set in to skin him, and you did skin him most outrageously."

"Well, Mark, you see I know that a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush."

"What has become of your bird in the hand? It flew right into the pocket of that 'gray,' and you lost more than you had made."

"Confound that old cuss! I shall never have any respect for myself until I get even with him in some way. He is a sharp from Sharpville, and I know that he was playing it fine on us all through the game. If they train that sort up in Posey county, I want to go there to learn to play cards."

"You had better let that old cuss alone, Silas, and I hope that you will manage matters so as not to interfere with my game any more. You have given me such a set-back that I am at my wits' end now to know how to play it."

"I believe, Mark, that the young fellow and the old one were in cahoot."

"That is not a bit likely."

"They went off together, or nearly together, and I am keen to bet that they went to divide spoil."

"Nonsense! Can't you think of anything but that infernal game?"

"I think I can tell you how to play your game."

"I wish you would. What do you suggest?"

"A better scheme than getting on the right side of that young chap, as well as an easier one, would be to get rid of him."

"You are proposing a crime to me, Silas."

"Many things that are done might pass for crimes; but they are all right when they pay. Better think it over, Mark."

Gerald Talcott had gone back to the ladies' cabin, where he explained to his sister as much as he chose to, of the termination of the card controversy at the other end of the boat, not caring to particularize the part he had taken in the affair.

Then, seeing Benjamin Gray sauntering about, he went to meet him, and the two sat down and had a little talk.

"I wanted to speak to you, my friend," said the old man. "You chipped in like a hero when I had that little difficulty at the poker table, and I ought to thank you for that. I don't think you needed to do it, though, as I hain't no idea that the feller meant to shoot. That was only a bluff game that he was playing."

"Perhaps so," answered Gerald; "but it looked rather scary, and I had a grudge against that man. He had not only swindled me, but you heard how he sneered at me for allowing myself to be controlled by my sister. I can't stand much of that sort of thing."

"It's easier to stand, though, when you know that you're right, and such a young lady as your sister is mighty apt to be right. Yes, Mr. Talcott, that man Birch had been cheating you—robbing you, as I may say, and when I took your place I thought I had a right to get even with him. I was playin' your game, you know, and I reckon I won your money back, and here it is for you."

Ben Gray dived into his pockets and brought up a miscellaneous assortment of bills and coins.

"No, no, Mr. Gray," protested Gerald. "That is one thing that I can't stand at all. I could afford to lose what I lost, and what you won is your own."

"This is what I was workin' for, though, and you ought to have it."

"You must let me take the will for the deed, Mr. Gray, I can't touch the money, and that settles it. Put it right back in your pocket."

"If I must, I must; but I don't keer for the money, and I was playin' your game."

"You were playing your own game, Mr. Gray, and it was such a game as I could never begin to play. I would not have believed it possible for you to get ahead of that party; but you are a splendid poker-player and up to all the twists and tricks of the game."

"To tell you the truth, my young friend, I used to be in the business, though I have been out of it for many years."

"One of those men, I suppose, was a professional card-player."

"Both of 'em, Mr. Talcott. The young man, Mark Hannafin, wasn't playin' his game with you; but he came out stronger when he tackled me—not quite strong enough, though. I am sorry that you worried that man Birch, as you gave him a good excuse for a grudge, and I'm afraid that he's a dangerous man to fool with."

"It seems to me that he may have a bigger grudge against you, Mr. Gray."

"Oh, that don't matter, and I reckon that I am able to take keer o' myself."

"I think that I am able to take care of myself, too."

"I hope so, and I hope that you will look out for that man Birch, if not for both of them."

At a landing made by the Rowena the next morning there came aboard a man with whom Birch and Hannafin were well acquainted, and it was for an experienced traveler to decide that he belonged to the sporting fraternity.

In the course of a conversation between this man and his two friends they related to him the events of the previous evening, and Birch pointed out Ben Gray as the man who, as he said, had robbed him of a large sum of money.

"Of course you don't know him, Hank," said he; "but that's the old cuss I want to get even with."

"So you think I don't know him," replied the other. "I do, though, and it is surprising to me that you two haven't dropped on him. In what part of the backwoods have you been living lately?"

"What do you mean, Hank? Who is he?"

"Grayville Gordon is supposed to be his name—Gray Gordon, as he is generally known—and he gives himself out as a returned Californian. He is said to be rich, too."

"Is he a sport?" inquired Birch.

"Well, you ought to know something about what he can do in that line; but he don't pretend to play cards for a living, and I suppose he don't need to. He travels a good deal, though, and sometimes picks up such suckers as you."

"We couldn't help it, as we knew nothing about the man. He came aboard at an Indiana landing, and said that he was from Posey county, and I am sure that he had the look and style of a 'gray.'"

"That is one of his games. I hope you won't come across any more such 'grays' as he is."

CHAPTER V.

THE PENALTY OF MEDDLING.

THE night following the experience of Gerald Talcott and Ben Gray with the "professionals" was very hot, there being no air stirring save that made by the steamer as she plowed her way down the turbid Mississippi.

Eva Talcott, not fancying the solitude of her state-room or the company of the cabin on such a night, seated herself on one of the after guards, well out of the way of other people, and was there enjoying the night air and the moonlight, when a light step informed her of the presence of an intruder.

Looking around, she recognized Mark Hannafin, who was approaching her quietly and with his hat in his hand.

Though his presence there was objectionable to her, if not annoying, it was not worth while to make any demonstration to drive him away, or to cause him to deem himself a person of sufficient consequence to be avoidable. If she should treat him coolly, he might be expected to go away.

She did treat him coolly, but he failed to go away.

For a while there was nothing in his words or manner at which a reasonable person could take offense, and Eva listened without any appearance of interest to his commonplace remarks concerning the warmth of the night and the pleasantness of that particular spot.

Then he led the conversation—that is, his own conversation—on to the events of the night before in the Social Hall.

"I was glad, Miss Talcott," said he, "that you called your brother away from the card-table last night, as I had good reason to know that he was being victimized there."

"By you?" quickly inquired Eva.

"By me? No, indeed. I was also a victim. I enjoy a social game now and then, but not well enough to play with gamblers, and I soon discovered that your brother and I had fallen in with a professional player who was fleecing us

badly. I did what I could to keep Mr. Talcott out of his clutches, but was unable to save either him or myself."

"I suppose I ought to thank you, sir, for your good intentions, though they seem to have been quite ineffectual."

"I meant well, however, and might have succeeded better if I could have got your brother to quit the game. What I did and tried to do was for your sake, Miss Talcott."

"For my sake, sir? I do not understand you."

"If you will have a little patience, you will soon be able to understand me. When I had the pleasure of being a fellow-passenger with you on the up trip of the Memphis, I could not help being strongly attracted toward you. Your beauty—"

"Please drop the subject, Mr. Hannafin. It is an unwelcome one, I assure you."

"Of course you have had so many compliments for your beauty, that it is no wonder if you are tired of the subject. You must have noticed the fact that I admired you, and my admiration is such that I have been waiting and watching for an opportunity to declare—"

"That will do, Mr. Hannafin," promptly interposed the young lady as she rose from her seat. "I told you that the subject was an unwelcome one, and I will hear no more. If you should attempt to renew it, I will be obliged to appeal to the captain for protection."

She passed him without a glance, and swiftly returned to the cabin.

Mark Hannafin gritted his teeth and frowned as he looked after her.

"I shall conquer that pride of yours yet, my lady," he muttered. "If one way won't work, another will, and I shall keep trying until I make you my wife."

Shortly after Eva had returned to the cabin she was joined by Gerald, who was quick to notice that she was not as bright as usual.

"You seem to be out of sorts, dear," said he. "Are you not well, or is the heat troubling you? No, something has happened that worried you. What is it, Eva?"

"Nothing of any consequence."

"But it is of consequence, whatever it is that has fretted you. What is it?"

"Your friend Hannafin has been annoying me a little—that is all."

"He is no friend of mine, Eva."

"He seemed to consider himself such, and made that an excuse for speaking to me."

"What did he want? What did he say?"

"I tell you that it was nothing of any consequence, and it is not likely to occur again."

"It shall not. I will see to that."

"I beg, Gerald, that you will do nothing of the kind. It was only a slight and temporary annoyance, I assure you, and I feel no uneasiness about it."

"Very well; but I don't want my sis to be worried."

Half an hour afterward Gerald Talcott met Mark Hannafin forward of the cabin, and spoke to him quietly.

"I would like to say a few words to you in private," said he.

"You are welcome to do so," answered Hannafin, and followed Gerald down to the main deck of the steamer.

It must be understood that the western river steamers are widely different from those of the East, the main or boiler deck being almost entirely open at the sides, and the spaces that are not filled with freight being mostly occupied by piles of wood for fuel.

The Rowena not only carried considerable freight above the hold, but was burning wood mostly in that part of the river, and had just taken on a fresh supply.

Consequently there were plenty of recesses on the main deck where those who wished to be secluded, especially at that late hour, would be out of the sight and hearing of every person but a casual passer-by.

The two young men stepped to the side of the boat, where they were sheltered in one direction by a wood-pile, and in another by a mass of boxes of freight.

There were no deck-hands about, and the only sounds to be heard besides their own voices, were the regular working of the engine, the heavy panting of the exhaust pipes and the churning of the big wheels.

Gerald Talcott hastened to open the subject on which he wished to speak.

"I understand, Mr. Hannafin, that you have been annoying my sister."

"Annoying her? Has she complained of me to you?"

"Of course she has not complained. She has mentioned the matter, and it is I who complain."

"Indeed! Very well, if you want to complain, go on with your complaining."

If it was a question of annoyance, there could be nothing more annoying to Mark Hannafin than the haughty and overbearing tone of young Talcott. Angered by the severe snubbing he had received from Eva, the gambler was in no mood to be taken to task by her brother.

Gerald, also, was inclined to resent the contemptuous manner in which his statement of the

cause of offense was treated by the other, and his hot blood boiled up quickly.

"My complaint," said he, "amounts to a warning, and it will be well for you to take it as it is meant. I want you to keep away from my sister hereafter. If you annoy her again while she is under my protection, it will be at your peril."

Hannafin's wrath was rising rapidly; but he kept it well under control, doubtless thinking it better to aggravate the other than to display his own temper.

"Look here, my fresh young friend," he mildly observed, "if I annoy your sister, it is for her to say so. As this is a free country, I have a right to admire her, and until she objects to my admiration I can't see that it is any of your business. She may not be of age yet; but she is surely able to speak for herself."

"Do you mean to say that she—" began Gerald.

"Don't let your journals get heated," broke in the other, "or the engine may have to be stopped to cool down. I mean to say that if she is annoyed, you are the main cause of her annoyance, and that is what we were talking about to-night. I was thanking her for having called you away from that poker game, as it was clear that you were being robbed by that man who was playing against you."

"And what were you doing?" hotly demanded Gerald.

"As I told your sister, I was doing what I could to keep you from being fleeced; but the effort was beyond my ability, and I was glad that you were called away."

It aggravated the youth intensely to be treated as a green boy by this young man, and his temper was getting beyond his control.

"And so that is the way you tried to work yourself into her favor. If she had known the truth, she would have thanked you for nothing. I shall tell her that it was you who roped me into that game, and that the man who cheated me was your partner."

It seemed from this remark that Gerald had not yet made a statement of that sort to his sister, and it would be well that he should not be permitted to make it.

Clearly the advice that Silas Birch had offered was sound. If Mark Hannafin was to gain Eva Talcott, it would be necessary to put a stop to the meddling of her brother, and there was but one way to stop it effectually. Such a stoppage might also be expected to double her value as an heiress.

The hour, the place and all the circumstances conspired to incline Mark Hannafin to adopt his partner's suggestion; but it would still be well to observe the proprieties of life and compel his antagonist to become the aggressor.

"Do you know what you would tell her if you should say that?" quietly asked the gambler.

"I know that I would tell her the truth, and I would go further and say to her that under no circumstances ought she to have anything to do with a professional gambler, such as you are."

"It seems to me," sneered Hannafin, "that such a statement would come with ill grace from the son of a professional gambler."

Gerald Talcott boiled over at this.

"If you mean to insinuate—" he blurted out.

"I don't mean to insinuate anything. I am simply stating a fact. Do you fancy that I don't know your origin?"

"You are a liar!"

As Gerald Talcott spoke the deadly word, he reached for his pistol pocket; but his antagonist was too quick for him.

This was the opportunity for which Mark Hannafin had been waiting, and he held an inside position, while Gerald was just at the edge of the guard where it was almost level with the water.

A quick and powerful blow did the work, and the youth, with a faint cry, fell backward and was swallowed up by the Mississippi.

As the big steamer swiftly sped away from the spot where Talcott sunk, there was an almost noiseless plunge in the water, from a point on the guard a little back of the place where the two antagonists had stood.

Mark Hannafin, who had not noticed that little occurrence, stepped back quickly, sauntered around among the piles of wood and masses of freight, and finally brought up at the boilers, where he had a little chat with the engineer on duty, his manner showing no trace of the excitement that might be expected to follow the recent tragical event.

"I am watching my steam gauge," remarked the engineer. "It is a new style, and the man who owns the patent was here just now to see how it worked."

"Who is he?" inquired Hannafin, trying to take an interest in the subject.

"His name is Gordon—Grayville Gordon, I believe, and he is a very sharp sort of an old fellow."

Then Hannafin did take a lively interest in the subject, though he did his best to conceal it.

"I think I know the man," said he. "How long since he was here?"

"Perhaps ten or fifteen minutes."

"Which way did he go when he left you?"

"Up to the cabin, I suppose."

It was natural that Mark Hannafin should be worried, in view of the possibility that Gray Gordon might have witnessed the encounter between him and Gerald Talcott.

Yet, if he had witnessed it, was it to be supposed that he would have gone away without raising an alarm or making any sign?

Hannafin wandered about the boiler deck, looking into every space that could hold a man, but saw nothing of the Gray Gordon who was known on the Rowena as Ben Gray.

He ascended to the cabin, where Ben Gray was not visible, and in the course of a few inquiries concerning Gray he failed to discover any person who had seen him lately.

Before he retired to his state-room Mark Hannafin patronized the bar liberally, hastily drinking glass after glass of whisky.

CHAPTER VI.

IN THE SWIFT RIVER.

As the engineer had informed Hannafin, the man who styled himself Ben Gray, but who was usually known as Gray Gordon, had come down to the boiler-deck to inspect the working of the new steam-gauge, and had conversed for a while with the man who could tell him the most about it.

When he turned to go back to the hurricane-deck, he caught sight of Hannafin and Talcott as they were coming from the forward part of the boat, and almost involuntarily he stepped behind a pile of freight to conceal himself.

There was nothing out of the way or unusual in the fact that two young passengers should come down there at that hour, possibly to enjoy the cool air from off the water; but to Gray Gordon the conjunction of those two at that time and place was peculiar, to say the least of it, and he determined to watch them and ascertain why they were there.

When they went over to the guards, evidently with the view of being out of sight, he shifted his place, getting where he could see all of what was done, and hear most of what was said.

An encounter was what he looked forward to as the outcome of this quarrelsome talk; but Hannafin's blow and its result was quite unexpected to him and completely upset his calculations.

As the evil had been done before he could interpose to prevent it, there was but one remedy left, and he changed his intentions with the quickness of thought.

As Talcott disappeared in the turbid current of the Mississippi, Gray Gordon plunged into the water, aiming for the spot where the youth had sunk.

Gerald had been surprised rather than stunned by the sudden blow, and soon came panting and spluttering to the surface.

As he did so he was surprised again by the hail of a friendly voice near by.

Though he recognized the voice, it was not that of his recent antagonist, and his surprise was increased when he saw above the water the face of Ben Gray.

"Can you swim?" inquired the old man.

"A little."

"That is better than not at all. Are you hurt?"

"I don't think I am, though I am dazed and rather weak."

"I am a whale at swimming, fortunately for both of us. Just put your hand on my shoulder and rest awhile. Don't try to exert yourself. There is no need of any sort of hurry, and nothing to be gained by extra efforts."

Gerald promptly did as he was told to do, and was able to recover himself and look about.

They were far from the hope of rescue by the steamer, even if their disappearance had been known on board.

Though they were going downward with the current pretty rapidly, the Rowena had the aid of her powerful engines and big wheels, and was already out of reach of the loudest hail.

It would be necessary to reach the shore by swimming, and the swift sweep of the Mississippi made that a rather difficult task, though the water was warm.

The heat of the weather gave them another advantage, as they were both dressed in thin clothing, which was comparatively a slight incumbrance.

Another advantage was found in the fact that when they went overboard the steamer was considerably nearer to the right bank of the river than to the left—that is to say, nearer to the Missouri shore.

The bright moonlight showed them the Rowena rapidly receding in the distance, the dark outlines of the two shores, and the turbid, rushing water that intervened between them and the nearest land.

"How did you get overboard, Mr. Gray?" inquired Gerald, who had not got over the surprise which the sight of his companion had caused him.

"I went overboard because you did."

"To save me?"

"Well, I suppose I must have had some such a project in my head. I saw that fellow knock you off the boat, and it occurred to me that the

only way to help you then was to jump in after you, and here I am."

"You were more than kind to risk your life to save me."

"There was precious little risk in it as far as I am concerned, and since I have learned that you can swim a little, and that you have sense enough to do just what I tell you to do, it seems to me that neither of us is in any real danger."

"I could never swim to the shore, Mr. Gray."

"I have no doubt that you will be able to get there with a little help from me. As we don't care where we land, we won't make any struggle against the current, but will let it carry us down as it pleases, while we strike across it in a slow and easy style. You see how well we are getting on now, and all we have to do is to take our time. You can keep your hand on my shoulder while I swim, and if you feel like it you may try a few strokes occasionally; but there is no use in getting tired, as we can rest whenever we choose."

Gerald wondered at the man who had not hesitated to jump overboard to save a chance acquaintance, and who had actually periled his life in so doing, however lightly he might regard the risk.

That action was not all there was to wonder at.

In his speech and his manner the man showed none of the uncouthness and countrified style that had been manifest in Benjamin Gray of the Rowena, and in every respect he appeared to be not only a clear-headed and sharp-witted man of the world, but possessed of that tender care and consideration for the needs and feelings of others which marks the real gentleman.

Gerald had little chance to indulge in these reflections or to wonder at the man, as the start for shore was begun, and all his powers were brought into play.

At the first he chose to strike out for himself, but soon grew weary, and laid his hand, as a matter of course, on the shoulder of his friend.

The old man was without doubt, as he had declared himself to be, a whale for swimming, and he easily managed the incumbrance of Gerald, aiming steadily toward the shore, and gradually approaching it without any special exertion, regardless of the swift current that carried him downward.

Something more than half the distance had been passed when they stopped to rest, and then, as they were swept down the stream, Ben Gray made a discovery that interested him.

"Seems to me that I see something down in the bend yonder that looks like a store boat. Do you see it, Gerald? I must call you Gerald for short, you know."

"Thank you; I am glad that you do. Yes, sir, I think I see something in the shape of a flatboat there."

"That is what we must strike out for. It will be better to come across some human beings than to land in the woods and be compelled to scratch out at random."

At once they started again, and aimed for the supposed flatboat, Gerald striking out for himself at first, and resting on the shoulder of his friend when he became tired.

By following implicitly the directions that had been given him, he impeded Gray's movements but slightly, and made the task of swimming easy enough for both of them.

The old man put in some of his best work until they had got fairly into the bend, where the current was slower than in the outer river, and then he eased off, allowing Gerald to swim for himself.

As the youth had by this time recovered his strength and gained a little valuable experience, he did very well, and in fact needed no further assistance.

They reached the bend a little above the object at which they had aimed, and could then easily perceive that it was a small flatboat, probably a storeboat.

No lights were visible on it, but of course there must be people on board, and the rest and refreshment it promised would come in good time to the two castaways.

After striking the comparatively still water they easily swam down to the boat, which lay against the bank at the lower part of the bend, out of the way of the force of the current.

It had the appearance of an elongated box, with a space of a few feet at each end that was not boxed in, a slightly curved roof, a long steering-oar, and two sweeps on swivels that were operated from the roof.

Ben Gray was the first to clamber upon the up-stream end of the craft, and he assisted his young friend, who had become quite exhausted by his swimming.

As no person was in sight, the old man gave a loud hail, which was speedily answered by a hail from within, followed by the noise of somebody moving about.

A light was struck inside, the door was shortly opened, and a rough-looking middle-aged man, with a half-dressed young man behind him, both armed, appeared at the opening.

"Who the deuce are you?" rudely demanded the man.

"Two poor devils," answered Gray, "who have been lost overboard, and have swum ashore."

"Jerewsha! Wal, you look it. How'd you happen to git overboard?"

"The plain truth is that my young friend here got in a fight and was knocked into the water, and I jumped in to keep him company."

"That's queer doin's. What d'you want here?"

"We happened to land here, and we want lodging for the rest of the night and breakfast in the morning."

"Able to pay for 't?"

"Oh, yes," quickly answered Gerald.

"We may have a little money in our pockets," remarked the old man—"enough to pay for what we want here, I reckon."

"Come inside, then."

The castaways bowed their heads as they entered the low doorway, and passed into the interior of the flatboat, which, as they had supposed, was fitted up for trading in a small way.

It was a narrow and low apartment in which they found themselves, occupying less than half of the flatboat, and partitioned off from the remainder, which probably contained the kitchen and sleeping arrangements.

By the dim light of a small oil lamp, they perceived that the greater part of one side of the room was taken up by a shabby and dingy bar with a scanty array of bar fixtures, and that the rest of the space was largely occupied by barrels, kegs, jugs and demijohns.

It was difficult to decide why an establishment in that ostensible business should be located even temporarily in that apparently uninhabited region, and the most plausible supposition was that there might be an illicit distillery near by, from which supplies were being drawn.

On a nearer view of the occupants of the flatboat, the castaways saw that one was a man somewhat older than Ben Gray, but large and robust, and that the other was a tall and strapping young fellow, ugly to look at, but of powerful frame.

Before they had taken the seats that were pointed out to them, another was added to the group—a scrawny, angular and big-fisted woman, who was probably the mother of one of the men and the wife of the other, and who had taken time to arrange her scanty toilet before she came out.

"Who are you, strangers?" inquired the old man. "The yarn you told was a queer one, and I want your names."

"My name is Gray Gordon," answered the individual who was mainly addressed, "and my young friend is Gerald Talcott. The yarn was straight enough, and I don't think it necessary to say any more."

The man suddenly straightened himself up, and the woman's dark face was lighted by a transient look of intelligence.

"All right," responded the former, "I am Israel Gonder, and this is young Israel, and that is my wife, Jane Ann. I reckon you'll be wantin' to turn in, and there's a pile o' blankets, and there's the floor. Ef you want any whisky, and kin afford to pay for it—"

"Thank you," interrupted Gordon, "but we don't drink."

"That's queer ag'in. Then we'll go back and finish out our sleep."

When the three had filed out of the room and gone to sleep, Gerald Talcott, who was weary and sleepy, was inclined to lie right down in his wet clothing and seek repose; but his companion was more wakeful as well as more suspicious.

He stepped silently to the door that had just been closed, and listened to the mumbling of an indistinct conversation that came through the thin partition.

After a while he stepped back softly, and seated himself at the side of his drowsy young friend.

"You will have to keep as wide awake as you can, Gerald," he whispered. "I am afraid that we have got into a tight place. I don't like the look of things here, and am inclined to believe that our friends in yonder want to rob us."

"I have precious little about me," answered Gerald, "and they are welcome to that."

"But you must remember that you can't get home without money. For my part, I have several hundred dollars of wet money in my pockets, and they won't be welcome to a dollar of it. It is lucky that we are at this end of the boat, and can step out and go ashore if we want to."

Gordon stole to the door, tried it, and stepped back to his friend.

"It's no use," he whispered. "The door is fastened. That shows that they mean business, and what kind of business they mean."

Gerald was then instantly wide awake and appreciative of the situation.

"We can easily burst open that door," he suggested.

"Yes, and then we would be sure to have a

row on our hands. We had better go slow, keep cool, and wait to see what they really mean to do. We could easily take care of ourselves if we were armed; but the loads in my pistol have of course been spoiled by the water. Do you happen to have your knife about you—the bowie that you showed to Birch at the card table?"

"Yes, that is all right."

"I don't seem to feel afraid of those folks, Gerald. If it turns out that they do want to rob us, watch me, and keep your wits awake, and you will know what to do."

They were not kept long in suspense, as the rear door was shortly opened, and in filed Israel Gonder, followed by his son and his wife.

CHAPTER VII.

THE DOOMED ROWENAS.

On board the Rowena Gerald Talcott was not missed until the day following his disappearance.

He was not visible at breakfast, and his sister was evidently troubled by his absence, though it was easy to suppose that he had overslept himself.

After breakfast she sent to his state-room, and the discovery was made that it had not been occupied during the night.

Here was indeed cause for apprehension, and Eva was thoroughly alarmed, making her alarm known in such a manner that the passengers and crew were thrown into a great state of excitement.

The steamer was searched throughout, and every person who could be supposed to know anything about the missing man was closely questioned; but no information concerning him could be elicited.

He had simply disappeared, suddenly, mysteriously and utterly.

It was certain that he had drunk no liquor since he left the card table, and it was therefore impossible that he should have fallen overboard in a state of inebriation, as was hinted by some.

The supposition which naturally occurred to Eva Talcott connected Mark Hannafin with her brother's disappearance, as she feared that Gerald, in spite of her expressed desire, had taken her annoy to task, and that an altercation had ensued.

But there was Mark Hannafin, with no visible weight of murder on his mind, and as eager and anxious in the search as anybody.

As the inquiry progressed there came to light another mysterious circumstance, which was easily connected with the disappearance of Gerald Talcott.

The passenger from Indiana who had registered as Benjamin Gray was also missing.

It was Mark Hannafin, with the aid of Silas Birch, who quietly diffused the insinuation that the two disappearances were dependent on each other or connected with each other, and that impression soon became general; but why had the two passengers disappeared, and what had become of them?

The Rowena had made but one landing during the night, and that was at a woodyard a little before day; but no passenger had been seen to go ashore, though it was possible that both the missing men might have done so without being noticed.

Yet Gerald Talcott's baggage was still on board, and Ben Gray's carpetbag was in his state room, and the wallet which he had deposited in the safe was examined by the clerk and found to be full of money.

The Indiana man's property was taken care of, and the conclusion arrived at was that both the disappearances must have been involuntary.

The only supposition remaining was that there had been, from some unknown cause, a collision between the two men, which had resulted in both of them falling overboard and consequently drowning.

Mark Hannafin threw a little darkness upon the case, rather than light, by questioning the character of the Indiana man, who had registered as Benjamin Gray, when his real name was Grayville Gordon, and this statement was confirmed by Mark's friend, Hank Byers, and subsequently by one of the engineers.

Though the fact furnished a suspicious circumstance, it did not really advance the investigation.

Eva Talcott, who was a young lady of considerable force of character, and who had her own ideas of the mystery, though they were somewhat confused, tried to get at the root of the matter by boldly questioning Hannafin, asking him if he had seen and spoken with her brother since she left him on the afterguard of the boat, outside of the ladies' cabin.

Nothing could have been more frank and open than the young man's answer.

"I am glad that you have spoken to me about that, Miss Talcott," said he, "as it gives me an opportunity to explain to you what I have already explained to others. I did see your brother after the time you mention, and we had a few words together; but they were friendly words, and I agreed at once to what he proposed. You may be sure of that, and at the same time may guess the nature of his proposal, from the fact that I have not spoken to you to-

day, though you may judge that I have been very anxious to do so."

"Was that the last you saw of my brother?" inquired Eva.

"The last I saw of him, and the last I heard of him. After that I had a little talk with the engineer, who told me that the Indiana man, whom he knew by the name of Gordon, had been there talking to him about the steam gauge. It is my impression that your brother was in that part of the boat about the time Gordon was there."

"I saw you go below with young Talcott last night," observed a passenger who stood near.

"No doubt you did. It was then that we had the little talk that I spoke of, and it was there that I parted from him. What of that?"

"I only know that you went below with him, and that you came back alone."

"What are you trying to get at?" fiercely demanded Hannafin. "You had better be careful what you say. Do you mean to hint that I had anything to do with the disappearance of the young gentleman? Perhaps you had better go on and say that I tumbled him and the Indiana man into the river."

The discussion threatened to develop into a controversy, and Eva Talcott was about to withdraw, when the startling cry of *fire* came up from below.

An alarm of fire on a Mississippi steamboat usually means destruction, and sudden and complete destruction at that.

The inflammable nature of the freight on the boiler deck, the tinderbox construction of the upper works, and the accessibility to every breeze that blows of the entire construction and its contents, leave little chance for saving property or life after the fire has got a start.

It is no wonder, therefore, that the utmost consternation prevailed on the Rowena, and that the panic-stricken passengers increased the confusion that was inseparable from the alarm.

The captain and other officers kept their heads in spite of the danger and the clamor, proved their willingness to sacrifice themselves for those in their charge, and did all that it was possible to do in the emergency.

As soon as the fire was discovered efforts were made to extinguish it; but they were utterly unavailing, and it was speedily made evident that the Rowena was doomed.

The only chance to save life was to run the boat ashore, and she was at once headed in that direction, the pilot at the wheel signaling to the engineer to run her for all she was worth.

The pilot—a hero, as all his tribe have been since steamboats began to be built—stuck to his post to the last moment, and the engineer did not think of leaving his engines until the flames had taken possession of them; but a brisk south wind fanned the fire until the Rowena blazed up like a pile of shavings, dense clouds of smoke hanging and drifting above the scene like a pall upon her coffin.

All these heroic efforts were useless or nearly so.

Before she could reach the shore the doomed steamer struck a hidden bar and grounded there, at a considerable distance from the land which her despairing passengers had hoped to reach.

The shock of the grounding toppled over the big smokestacks, and sent them crashing through the upper works, adding to the confusion and greatly increasing the volume of flame.

The fire that had started near the bow of the boat, and had already consumed the forward part of the cabin, swept rapidly backward, devouring everything in its way, and presenting a wall of flame to those who wished to look toward the shore.

As the stern of the Rowena was in comparatively deep water, the passengers who had retreated thither before the fire could only drop off or plunge into the stream as the heat drove them, hoping to reach the shore or strike the bar.

The pillar of smoke and flame that rose above the burning boat attracted the attention of an upward-bound steamer, which endangered her own existence in her strenuous endeavor to pile on steam and reach the scene in time to save life; but before she could get there many had been destroyed by the fire and the water.

Most of the cabin passengers had descended to the lower deck, where those who remained on board were huddled together, as far as possible from the fire, endeavoring to devise means of escape.

Eva Talcott had stationed herself on the upper guard near the ladies' cabin, just where she had her interview with Mark Hannafin, and there she remained motionless, awaiting the fate which appeared to be inevitable.

There she was sought and found by the young gambler, who hastened to her with two life-preservers.

"I have been looking everywhere for you, Miss Talcott," said he, "and am glad that I have found you at last. You have no time to lose if you want to save your life."

"You are very kind, Mr. Hannafin," she answered; "but you had better try to save your own life, as it will be as much as you can do. I do not care what becomes of mine."

"Why do you say that, Miss Talcott?"

"My brother has been lost, and I do not care to live."

"But there are others left for whom you ought to live, whether you wish to or not. There is your mother."

He had struck the right chord, and she yielded.

"You are right, Mr. Hannafin, and I have been very wicked, standing here and making no effort. But you should not trouble yourself about me. If you can save your own life, it will be as much as you can do. Look at that struggling throng in the water. Death is as certain there as here."

"But I believe that I can save you, Miss Talcott, if you will trust yourself to me. I have brought a life-preserver for you, and I have a friend waiting for me below here, waiting to help you. We are both strong men and good swimmers, and we know what to do and how to do it."

Without waiting for any further remonstrances the young man fastened a life-preserver upon her, and attached another to himself.

"Now you must step over to the other side of the boat," said he, "as there are fewer people there, and we will have a better chance."

She allowed him to lead her through the cabin to the other guard, where he leaned over the rail and hailed his friend below.

"Are you there, Birch?"

"Yes, but you must be quick, as it is getting infernally hot down here."

"All right. Stand by to jump in after the lady when she goes over. Now, Miss Talcott, you must get up on the rail and jump bravely. My friend will look out for you below, and I will follow you instantly."

She hesitated, and he pointed to the cabin, which was already full of smoke.

"The fire is just rushing at us, Miss Talcott. Five minutes more, and it will be death to stand here."

The smoke was becoming suffocating and the heat unbearable, and the water was surely better than the fire.

She permitted him to lift her up on the rail, and with a bold, free jump, she went over.

Hardly had she touched the water when Silas Birch leaped in, and the next moment Mark Hannafin came after her.

As she came to the surface both men seized her.

CHAPTER VIII.

A TOUGH HOTEL.

THE light was still burning in the part of the flatboat occupied by Gordon and Gerald when the Gonder tribe came in, and it was evident that they were armed.

As they were thus ready for business, there could no longer be any doubt as to the kind of business they intended.

Gray Gordon looked up, and the surprised expression of his countenance was mingled with utter innocence.

Israel Gonder was armed with a revolver, his son carried a shotgun, and his wife held behind her something that was probably a weapon.

"What's up?" mildly inquired Gordon. "Are you afraid of robbers?"

"Not unless you're that sort," gruffly answered the old man.

"We? Do we look like it? We would not be likely to swim ashore from a steamboat to go into the thieving business."

"I don't know what you'd be likely to do; but I know that you didn't bring no baggage to this hotel, and that I want my pay in advance."

That's all right, though you might have said so sooner; but I don't see why you need come with guns and clubs to collect what we had intended to pay in the morning."

"I want it now, you see."

"How much do you want?"

"Just the pile that you've got about you. We happen to know that you are rich, you two, and we need money right bad, so we want all you've got."

"It don't amount to much, I can tell you; but you will be welcome to what there is of it. It will be pretty rough on us, though, to turn us out in this neck of woods without a dollar, and far from our homes. Can't you leave us a little?"

"I'll see about that when I know what the pile is. Shell out, now, and be quick about it."

Gray Gordon rose slowly, and thrust a hand into one of his trousers pockets.

"I will have to be careful how I fetch it out," he said, as he walked toward the old flatboatman. "What I have is mostly in paper, and the water has put it in a bad fix. Have a little patience, and I will give it to you in as good a shape as possible."

By this time he had reached the old man, who was holding out an eager and itching palm for the money.

"Here it is," said Gordon, as he drew out his hand.

Suddenly he drew it backward and launched out a powerful blow with his clinched fist, striking Israel Gonder on the jaw, and knocking him over against his son.

Gerald Talcott had been not only watching, but to an extent imitating the movements of his friend.

He got up as Gordon did, but, instead of thrusting his hand into his pocket, he slipped it behind his hip where his knife was.

When Gordon knocked down old Israel, Gerald sprung upon young Israel with his knife, not using the blade, but the haft, with which he struck his tall antagonist such a sudden and savage blow as stretched him senseless on the floor.

It was the surprise and unexpectedness with which the two castaways had got their work in that told the story and turned the tables in their favor so quickly, and the fact that young Israel was embarrassed in his movements by his father's fall against him had greatly aided Gerald in his attack.

The old flatboatman, who was not stunned by the blow he had received, speedily began to pick himself up, but his revolver was then in Gordon's possession, and the sharp click of its lock intimidated not only him, but his wife, who was brandishing the hatchet she had held behind her with the intent of making an attack upon Gerald.

"You will have to take a back seat, my friends," quietly observed Gordon. "We are running this game now, and you are counted out. I think, Mrs. Gonder, that you had better look after your son, though I don't suppose that he is badly hurt. Your style of keeping a hotel, I am sorry to say, does not suit us at all, and we will have to leave you; but we must take the tools that you try to collect your bills with. Gerald, pick up that shotgun."

Gerald possessed himself of the weapon, while Israel Gonder and his wife stood there scowling, not daring to move, and in no humor for talking.

"As we are not in the habit of taking something for nothing," continued Gordon, "I will leave you my revolver in place of this one. A fair exchange is no robbery, Mr. Gonder, and my pistol is a better article than yours, though it is a little under the weather just now. The shotgun we will pay cash for, and how much do you think it might be worth? Say ten dollars? That is a big price for it, but I will put it at that figure, if you have no objection."

No objection was offered, and Gordon fished out of his wet pocket a ten-dollar gold-piece, which he laid on the bar counter.

"Now we are square, Mr. Gonder," said he, with the odds in your favor, and I will thank you to open the door and bow us out. Of course you are sorry to see us go, but you need not add to our grief by saying so. If you expect to go on keeping hotel here, my friend, I would advise you to change your style, as you might run across some people who would kick against it worse than we did. Farewell, then, and may we never look upon your like again."

Israel Gonder had opened the door, and Gerald and his friends backed out, for fear of accidents, and stepped ashore.

As they backed out they perceived that young Israel had vitality enough to stir and got up on his knees.

They climbed the bank without any delay, and walked away into the woods, glad that they had so easily got out of what had threatened to be a bad scrape, and carrying the weapons which they had taken, rather to get them out of the hands of the flatboatmen, than because they supposed they might need them.

As Gordon turned and looked back across the river, he perceived signs of coming day in the eastern sky, and, as the moon had not yet set, it was apparent that they need not have any fear about finding their way.

In fact, there was a trail which led from the bank directly toward the west, which they naturally stepped into and followed.

"We are well out of that little difficulty," observed Gerald.

"Yes, a little better than I had expected at one time, and I am glad that you take it so pleasantly. Glad, too, that you were so wide awake just when your wits were wanted. If you had not seconded me as you did, we would have been worse off. But I am afraid, my boy, that you are tired out and can't stand much more fatigue and worry."

"What, I? As I am young and strong, I surely ought to be able to stand this kind of thing, and I may say that I am just getting warmed up to it. It is for you, who am much older than I, that I am uneasy, when I think of what you have gone through for my sake. You have risked your life, and have got yourself into all this trouble, for a mere chance acquaintance. If it had not been for you, I would not be living now, and how can I ever thank you?"

"It is not worth while to try, Gerald. As a matter of fact, it was not entirely for your own sake that I tried to help you, but partly for your father's sake."

"For my father's sake?"

"Yes, I knew him when I was considerably younger than I now am."

"You knew Colonel Talcott?"

"I never had the pleasure of meeting that gentleman."

"Of whom are you speaking, then?"

"Of your father, whose name was not Talcott, but Holcomb. I supposed you knew that."

Gerald did know that, to his sorrow. He had hoped that the unpleasant fact might have passed into oblivion; but this was the second time he had been reminded of it within twenty-four hours—first by the man who had sought to slay him, and then by the man who had unquestionably saved his life.

At the moment he almost wished that his savior had let him alone, and that thought kept him silent for awhile as they followed the forest trail together.

But reflection soon convinced him that such a feeling was unworthy of him. How could he be angry with a man whose friendship was so sincere and had been so fully proved by his conduct?

"So you were acquainted with my father?" he said, after a while.

"I know him years ago," answered Gordon, "when I was playing cards on the river here."

"He was a gambler?"

"At that time he was in the pasteboard business, just as I was. Quite a decent fellow, too, in spite of that, and generally respected."

"I suppose you know that he is dead."

"Years ago, as I have heard. Well, Gerald, there are plenty of worse people than Josiah Holcomb under the sod, and we will let him rest."

"You are very kind, Mr. Gordon, and you have done so much for me that I ought not to question anything you have done or may do; but there is one matter about which I am a little curious."

"Question away, my boy, and question as much as you please. I don't pretend to be always right in what I do; but you may be sure that I mean well by you."

"I would like to know, then, why you, if your name is Grayville Gordon, registered on board of the Rowena and passed yourself off there as Benjamin Gray."

"It is a fair question, and one that is easy to answer. That is one of my little games. It amuses me, and I think there is no harm in it. I am still fond of a lively game of poker, and of course I prefer to play to win. Therefore I don't impose myself on the suckers, as the professional gamblers call their victims, but let the lambs alone and pay attention to the wolves. My only chance to get hold of them in the right way is to pass myself off as a sucker and let them play me for all I am worth. When they think they have got the hook in my gills it delights me to upset them and run off with their fishing tackle, as I did with the two fellows who were fleecing you."

"Do you often worry them in that way?" inquired Gerald.

"Very seldom; but when the freak seizes me I have to give way to it. If they can beat me, they are welcome to do it; but their success would never do to brag on."

Daylight had appeared, and soon the sun rose; and the travelers had no difficulty in making their way through the forest, especially as the path they were following was a plain and easy one.

It was somewhat strange, however, that they came across no other road or trail, and failed to see any farm-house or cultivated land or even a clearing.

"I don't understand this," observed Gordon. "It is of course an uninhabited tract that we have struck here, and it may be many miles in extent; but there ought to be some sort of a road leading up and down the river, which this trail should cross. A river road is what I should have calculated on as a sure thing."

"It is bottom-land that we are crossing now," suggested Gerald, "and I suppose it is overflowed when the river is up. Perhaps the river road, if there is one, keeps to the bluffs."

"Well, we will know more about it pretty soon, as there are the bluffs."

The bluffs which became visible through an opening in the trees appeared to be but moderate elevations of the land, except at one point where they assumed a hilly and broken character.

Toward that point the trail which they were following tended, and there was as yet no clearing or other evidence of human habitation in that region.

"Confound such a country as this is, anyhow!" grumbled Gordon. "I suppose we will have to tramp until we tire ourselves out, before we strike a house or any people. No, Gerald, there's a whiff of smoke rising from the bluff yonder. Do you see it?"

Gerald did see it, and perceived that it seemed to come from a rift in the bluff toward which the trail pointed. It was but a thin and light curl of smoke, but with a homelike and hospitable look, strongly suggestive of the breakfast which the two wayfarers wanted so badly.

Spurred up by this cheering signal, they hastened on at their best speed, and soon entered the break in the bluff to which the trail led them, and from which the smoke was yet rising.

It was deep, narrow and heavily timbered, gradually tending upward from the bottom-

land, and with no road or path leading into it but that by which the travelers had come.

When they had got apparently about half-way up the bluff, the passage began to widen, and they could see the smoke more plainly before them.

"I think it can't be long now," remarked Gordon as they halted for an instant, "before we see something or somebody."

As if in answer to his words there came a sharp and sudden hail from right ahead.

"Hello thar! Stop whar you are!"

Gerald Talcott, who was carrying the shotgun, involuntarily raised it at this menacing salute; but another hail advised him to drop it, and he did so.

CHAPTER IX.

AMONG THE MOONSHINERS.

THOUGH there had been two hails, and though it was easy to judge pretty closely the locality from which they had proceeded, the entire affair was pervaded by an element of unpleasant uncertainty.

As they had been ordered to stop where they were, and as it was reasonable to suppose that the order had backing to enforce it, it would be as dangerous for the travelers to retreat as to advance.

Having come so far, they were in no humor for retreating, and the uncertainty did not suit either Gray Gordon or his friend; so the former made a move to break it.

"Hello, yourself!" he shouted. "What's up here? Who are you, and what do you want?"

"Jest you wait right thar!" responded the voice ahead, "and you'll find out arter a bit. If you try to stir, you'll git hurt."

Then followed a shrill whistle, answered from further up the ravine.

"Wait thar till we come to you!" ordered the voice again.

"I can guess what this means," whispered Gordon to his young friend. "We have struck a secret still, and one of the lockouts has halted us. I am afraid that this means more trouble for us, and I wish we had not come here."

There was no use in wishing, as they were there, and the only reasonable thing to do was to stay there and await the issue of the event.

Gray Gordon set the example of patience and coolness by depositing himself on the trunk of a fallen tree, and the uncertainty was presently broken by the approach of three men who came down the path.

One of them was quite a young man, another was considerably older, and the third was an elderly person, to judge by his grizzled hair and white beard.

All were rough in their dress and general appearance, and all were armed with repeating rifles and revolvers.

Gray Gordon, without rising from his seat on the log, looked up and addressed them in a peaceable and conciliatory manner.

"I hope you will tell me, my friends, what is the meaning of this. If there is a war going on anywhere, or if there is any sort of a military camp about here, we were ignorant of it, and we want to be counted out of other folks's fusses. We are strangers in this latitude, and we were looking for a place to rest and get something to eat when we were halted here."

The old man, who had been looking closely and sharply at the travelers, addressed himself to his companion who was next to him in age.

"I reckon, Sam, that you have made a mistake about these men. There don't seem to be anything the matter with them."

"Didn't say that thar was anythin' the matter with 'em, Colonel Rapp. Orders was to keep a sharp lookout and halt everybody, and that's what I did."

"That was right, of course, and there's no harm done. But these gentlemen are straight enough, I should say. They don't look as if they had anything to do with Uncle Sam's revenue service."

"You are quite right there, sir," responded Gordon. "We are connected with nobody but ourselves, and are mainly given to minding nobody's business but our own."

"So I suppose, and you wouldn't want to worry any poor people who are trying to make an honest living in a small way."

"Not we, indeed. There is nothing the matter with us, except that we are in bad luck just now, and need food and rest."

"Come on up to our den, then, and we will do what we can for you."

The old man who had been addressed as Colonel Rapp led the way, and his two followers brought up the rear, with Gordon and Talcott in the middle of the party.

This arrangement, indicating that two strangers were under guard, made the little procession look more like a capture than a friendly visit; but it was not worth while to object to it on that ground, as Colonel Rapp and his men appeared to be well disposed, and especially as any objection could only have taken the form of a fight against odds.

Gordon was willing to admit, however, that he did not exactly like the look of things.

"I think," he whispered to Gerald, "that we have struck the still from which our friends of

the flat-boat draw their supplies, and I wish we had not come here."

Even this bit of a whisper attracted the attention of the leader, who turned on them at once.

"Anything the matter?" he sharply demanded.

"Nothing at all," answered Gordon.

"What are you whispering about, then?"

"I was suggesting to my young friend here that we are probably on our way to a still-house."

"It is easy enough to guess that. But you want to speak out what you've got to say. I don't like whispering."

"Then I will speak right out and say that neither of us would object to a drink of the pure stuff this morning."

After Colonel Rapp's warning there was no more whispering, and within a few minutes the party reached the headquarters of the moonshiners.

The were not at all formidable in appearance, nor were they in any way interesting except to those who had business there, being merely two low and shabby cabins, the smaller of which was the abode of the still, and the larger the lodging-house of the workers.

Two more men were visible up here, making quite a respectable force to guard the premises, and all seemed to be willing and able to defend what they called their rights.

The guests of the moonshiners—or the captives, as the case might be—were invited into the larger cabin, where they were informed that they would soon have as good a breakfast as could be provided for them—an assurance that would have been more satisfactory if they had not at the same time been disarmed.

"I will take care of these guns of yours," observed Colonel Rapp as he deprived them of their weapons. "Of course you won't need them while you are here, as you have us to defend you."

As there was no gainsaying this statement, and no use in objecting to it, the visitors tried to make the best of it, and Gray Gordon did not fail to thank the old man for his kindness.

"Now, gentlemen," said the latter as he seated himself near them, "I want to know who you are, and where you came from, and how you got here."

"That is easy to tell," answered Gordon, who continued to act as the spokesman of the visitors. "My name is Gray Gordon, and my young friend is named Gerald Talcott."

"I have surely heard the name of Gray Gordon, and it seems to me that I must have seen your face before now, though I can't begin to place it. But that's no wonder, as I am badly mixed about names as well as faces, and would not even be willing to bet that my name is really mine. Queer, ain't it? I have seen some people who claimed to be related to me, but I couldn't place them."

"Perhaps they were lying," suggested Gordon.

"Maybe so, and maybe not. I can't tell. I was killed once, you see, and that accounts for my getting things twisted."

"Only once?" was on the tip of Gordon's tongue; but he could easily guess that any flippancy on the subject would be regarded by the old man as a deadly insult, and he did not speak his thought.

"That is a great pity," said he, as he assumed as solemn an expression as the situation would allow.

"Maybe it is, and maybe it isn't. You can't always be sure that you know good luck from bad. Anyhow, it has nothing to do with the business. Go on and tell me where you came from and how you got here."

"That's a queer piece of business, too, colonel," answered Gordon, who was particular in giving his host the title by which he had heard him addressed.

"Not too queer for me to believe, I hope."

"I hope it is not, and I hope you will believe me when I say that I mean to give it to you straight. But I must admit that I would have my doubts of the yarn if I should hear anybody else tell it. The truth is, Colonel Rapp, that we swam ashore from a steamboat."

"It is pretty tough, for a fact," observed the moonshiner. "What made you do such a trick as that? Did you have to?"

"Well, partly so. Yes, I may say that we had to. My friend Talcott got into a difficulty with a man there, who took him unawares and knocked him overboard. Seeing no other way to save him, as the boat was running downstream very fast, I jumped in after him and helped him to swim ashore."

"That was kind of you, Mr. Gordon, to say the least of it, and it was a good job to make the trip to shore. Not every man can buck against that river and live. You must be fond of the young man. What is he to you?"

"He is a human being," answered Gordon a little evasively.

"Well, yes, he does look as if he might be something in that line; but we don't jump into the Mississippi for every human being we meet. What else is he to you?"

"I think I can call him my friend," replied

Gordon rather gruffly, as if these questions were annoying him. "I couldn't see him drown before my eyes, and I suppose it was a sudden impulse that caused me to jump in and help him. There was nothing particular in that."

"Something to him, perhaps. Of course it is nothing to me, and I don't pretend to say that it is any of my business. After you got clear of the water, though, how did you get from the shore out here? It is quite a tramp."

"That is where we struck a little trouble, colonel. We were treated very inhospitably at a flatboat where we landed and asked for accommodations. That proved to be too tough a hotel for us."

The interest of Colonel Rapp in the subject seemed to increase suddenly, as he leaned forward with an eager look.

"Indeed!" he exclaimed. "Where was that? Tell me all about it."

Gordon was of the opinion that he had stepped into hot water; but it was necessary to wade through, and he told the story of the difficulty with the Gonder family plainly and fully, of course making his story tell as plainly as possible against the flatboat men.

"I thought that something of the kind was the matter," said Colonel Rapp when this narrative was concluded. "I recognized, you see, the shotgun that you brought here as belonging to Israel Gonder, and wanted to know the facts of the case, so that I might judge how you had come by it."

There was no doubt, then, that the moonshiners were friends of the flatboat men, if not confederates, and this fact gave the affair a dark look for the castaways; but they were not yet disposed to despair.

"Well, you've got the facts plain and straight," suggested Gordon.

"So you say. I've got your side of the case, anyhow, but must hear the other before I can decide how the matter stands. You say that the Gonder family tried to rob you of your property; but it is certain that you have got some of their property in your possession—how much more I can't say."

"We paid for what we took," declared Gordon.

"That is the toughest part of the story, every bit of which is hard to swallow. To believe that you bought a man's gun, either after or before he used it in trying to rob you, is too much to take down. It seems to me, my friends, that the boot is on the other foot."

"Do you mean to charge us with being robbers?" indignantly demanded Gerald.

"That is what it looks like, young man, and it ain't worth while for you to kick against the facts. It looks as if you have been robbing those poor people at the river, and I only hope you hain't murdered them."

"This is too much!" ejaculated Gerald.

"Yes, it would be too much, and I hope you haven't done it. I should think that you might have got up a yarn that people would be more likely to believe; but you have told a crooked story, and it has got to be straightened out somehow. Those folks at the river seem to be poor but honest people, and it would be a great pity if they have come to harm. I have sent to them and they will be here before long, if they are alive."

CHAPTER X.

CLEANED OUT.

THE position of affairs was far from encouraging to Gray Gordon and his young friend, who found themselves in a predicament from which there seemed to be no way of extrication, and the result of which promised to be considerably worse than disagreeable.

The last statement made by Colonel Rapp, added to the conclusion at which he had previously arrived, assured the captives that they could expect nothing less than to be handed over to the tender mercies of the defeated and disgusted flatboatmen.

The smooth and plausible manner of the old moonshiner appeared to them then to have been intended to deceive, and it was evident that he had been leading them into a trap which he meant to spring on them.

But there was no help for it; they were in the trap, and it was useless to wriggle or squirm; so they continued to face the trouble boldly.

"The facts are exactly as I have stated them, Colonel Rapp," said Gordon, "and if you should disbelieve us, I can only say that we are in worse luck than we had thought for. But that is no reason why we should starve, and I am sure, colonel, that you promised us some breakfast."

"So I did, and you must have it right away."

The promised breakfast happened to be ready, and was brought in immediately. It happened, also, to be a very good breakfast, stewed squirrels being a dish that was well calculated to tempt the appetites of hungry men, and Gordon and Talcott ate so heartily that they almost forgot their troubles in the comfort caused by the palatable food.

Yet it must be admitted that although their improved bodily condition inspired them with hope, they found it impossible so to act as to

cause the moonshiners to believe in their honesty and thus secure a realization of their hopes.

There was no getting over the fact that circumstances were against them, so their case was already prejudged.

In view of Colonel Rapp's acquaintance with the Gonder family—whether he believed in the honesty of those "poor people" or not—the story which the castaways had told him was exactly the thing that would not secure his sympathy in their favor.

It was clear that he disbelieved that story, and was prepared to believe anything that the Gonders might allege to their discredit.

Thus they perceived—or Gordon did, at least—that the best they could say would only give their case a worse look, and they took refuge in silence.

From this condition they were relieved—if it could be called relief, and it at least braced up the two captives—by the arrival of the two Gonders, father and son, and the only wonder was that the old woman had not come with them.

When they came into the cabin, their faces wore such a malignant look of expectant triumph, that it was clear that they had been thoroughly posted as to what had been told there, and as to what they might safely say and do.

The evidence of their looks was immediately confirmed by their speech.

"Yes, Colonel Rapp," put in the elder Israel, "them's the rascals that robbed us, and it's lucky you caught 'em and sent us word, so's we could git back our prop'ty."

"What did we rob you of?" indignantly demanded Gordon.

"Part of it was a shotgun and a pistol, as Colonel Rapp knows."

"We left a pistol in place of that which we took, and left money to pay for the shotgun."

"That's one of the yarns that nobody is likely to believe. 'Twas bad enough to rob us, without lyin' about it."

"Why, you infernal scoundrel, you came upon us when you thought we were asleep, and demanded our money or our lives."

The appearance of virtuous indignation assumed by the two flatboatmen at this juncture was not well put on, but its intent was evident enough.

"Is that the sort o' yarn you've been tellin'?" yelled old Israel. "Why, Colonel Rapp, it's a wonder that them hellions let us escape with our lives. My son thar was knocked down by 'em and left fur dead, and it seemed like we'd never bring him to ag'in."

Young Israel confirmed this statement most emphatically.

"Maw would ha' come along," he added, "to swar ag'in the rascals; but she was skeered nigh to death, and was used up so bad that she wasn't fit to stir."

The castaways were so overcome by these astounding and unblushing falsehoods that they could say no more, and it would have been useless for them to try to do so, as it was evident that the case had been already decided against them.

"How much money did they take from you, Mr. Gonder?" inquired Colonel Rapp.

"Well, I dunno. I reckon they must ha' took all thar was on the boat; but we've been so worried and tore up that we hain't been able to look and see. Anyhow, they said they didn't have a dollar when they came aboard, and it stands to reason that if they've got anythin' now it belongs to us."

"You infernal old liar!" burst out Gordon.

"Stop that!" ordered Colonel Rapp. "It is enough to have robbed these poor people, and I can't allow you to abuse them."

"Do you mean to say that you believe that we are a pair of robbers?"

"What else can I believe? I know these people, and have found them honest and well-meaning. I know nothing about you, except that you have told me a pack of stuff that is altogether incredible. They have told me a straight and reasonable story, which only confirms what I had previously suspected. Yes, I believe that you have robbed them, and they have a right to get back their property."

This was the decision of a court from which there was no appeal, and there was nothing for the castaways to do but submit.

The flatboatmen manifested an eager desire to take upon themselves the immediate execution of the sentence, but Colonel Rapp halted them, and deputed one of the moonshiners to search the prisoners.

Gray Gordon had sought an opportunity to conceal his valuables, but had not found one, as the strangers had been closely watched.

The search of Gerald Talcott did not pan out very extensively; but in one of Gordon's pockets was found a large roll of bills, which included the money he had raked in at the poker game on the Rowena.

As the money was still wet, he sought to make a point of that fact.

"Just look at those bills, colonel," he requested. "You see that they must have been very wet, as they have not dried out yet. It is clear that they must have been in my pocket

when I swam ashore, and therefore I could not have taken them from that flatboat."

"There might be something in that if you had swam ashore," answered the old moonshiner; "but I see no reason to believe that you did anything of the kind. It was easy enough to wet the money so as to back up your yarn. Mr. Gonder, is that your property?"

"Of course it is," promptly replied the elder Israel. "My son here kin swar to it, and so could the old woman, if she was able to git here."

"You had better take care of it, then."

Israel Gonder pounced upon the plunder like a duck on a June-bug, and lost no time in taking care of it; and thus the case was settled, the victims perceiving the uselessness of protests.

"Do you want anything more?" grumpily demanded Gordon. "As you have stripped us, perhaps you will now turn us loose."

"Is there anything more?" inquired Colonel Rapp.

"We ought to take the durn thieves out and give 'em a dose o' hickory," declared old Israel.

"I reckon not, Mr. Gonder. Seems to me that you've got enough out of them. You may go, my friends."

"Friends?" grumbled Gordon. "Is this the way you treat your friends?"

"It is the way we treat your sort. If you are going to talk like that, I shall feel inclined to accept Mr. Gonder's suggestion."

No further violence was attempted, however, and the two castaways left the cabin, accompanied by the chief moonshiner to the place where they had been halted.

Colonel Rapp pointed out the course which they might take to reach the river at a point below where they had struck it; but something seemed to weigh upon his mind, as he stared strangely at Gordon.

"I wonder where I have met you before?" he said to that gentleman.

"You are too much for me there," answered Gordon; "but I am willing to say that I doubt whether it will be healthy for you to meet me again."

"Do you threaten me? Well, I don't care if you do, and you may just go along."

Gray Gordon and Gerald Talcott trudged away silently and with rueful countenances. They were too much ashamed of themselves to speak to each other, or felt unable to do justice to the subject.

It was not until they reached the bottom-land that they began to brighten up, and Gerald was then the first to recover his spirits.

"Well, Mr. Gordon," said he, "there is one consolation for us in the midst of our misfortunes. We have had a good breakfast."

"And a good price we paid for it, too," grumbled Gordon. "But I am glad to see, my boy, that you are disposed to bear your afflictions so well, and I am worried not so much by what was done as by the way it was done. It was all my fault, and I ought to be tied to a tree and thrashed for the stupid style in which I got us into that scrape. It is sad to think, too, that it was all caused by telling the truth."

"How so?"

"That's just what the matter is, Gerald. If there was a preacher here, he would have a fine chance to make a sermon and bring out the point that the truth must not be told at all times. Just now we are mournful examples of the evil effects of telling the truth."

"I would not have thought of looking at it in that light."

"But that is exactly the state of the case. If I had lied to that confounded moonshiner, the chances are that we would have had no sort of difficulty. But I was foolish enough to tell him the truth, and the truth, as is usually the case, was too tough to be believed. I could easily have cooked up a yarn which he would have swallowed without the slightest difficulty, and then we would have come through all right."

"So you don't recommend telling the truth as a practice?"

"Not always. You must know who it is that you are giving it to, and be careful not to cast your pearls before swine."

"What is your opinion of that old moonshiner?" inquired Gerald.

"The colonel? He is a queer customer, and I doubt if he is altogether right in his head. But he was sharp enough to join in with those scamps to rob us, and that settles his case."

Gerald was not ready to take this view of the case.

"If the moonshiner wanted to rob us," said he, "he could have done it easily enough without calling in those flatboat people."

"I suppose so," answered Gordon; "but that is a bit of his querness. Perhaps he wanted to compromise with his conscience and give a show of right to the robbery. I don't bear him as strong a grudge as I bear those rascals of flatboatmen, and if I come across them again I will be sure to make life a misery to them."

By taking the route which had been pointed out to them by "Colonel" Rapp, the two friends crossed a bend and struck the river several miles below the point where they had landed, and after a comparatively short journey.

Considerably to their surprise, they came out where another flatboat was moored at the bank—a craft similar in appearance to that of the Gonders, but somewhat larger.

This caused them to halt and consider what they had better do.

"That is a good place to keep away from," was Gerald's opinion. "A burnt child dreads the fire, and I am afraid of flatboats."

"What's the odds? We have nothing to gain. No enemies can hurt us, and we may find friends to help us."

Just then there came out of the flatboat, and stepped up on the roof, a man whom Gordon recognized at once.

"Come on, Gerald!" he joyfully exclaimed. "We are all right now. That man is Josh Simbell, and he is a friend of mine."

Gordon hastened to the flatboat, and was instantly desecrated by the man on the roof, who came down and greeted him warmly.

"Why, Mr. Gordon, how did you ever get here?"

"How did you ever get here, Josh, yourself?"

"All your doing, Mr. Gordon. You helped me to buy this boat and stock it, and I have been getting on right well. Come aboard and see for yourself."

The two friends followed Josh Simbell into the boat, where they discovered that the crew consisted of five people—Josh, his two sons, his wife and his father.

The flatboat was loaded with stoneware from the southern part of Indiana, which explained Gray Gordon's connection with the business, and there was still a good stock on hand, to be peddled out on the way down the river.

When Gordon had made Gerald Talcott acquainted with the flatboat people, he wanted to satisfy his curiosity concerning the presence of the craft at that locality.

"It is an out-of-the-way place," said he. "There is no sign of a settlement about here, and I can't imagine what business you find to do."

"We have done right well here, though," answered Josh Simbell. "We have struck one of the best settlements near here that we have yet come across."

"Where is the settlement?" inquired Gordon.

"Not much of a settlement, but good enough for us. Back in the woods is a moonshiners' still that was needing jugs when we came. In the bend above here is a flatboat that takes a power of stuff from the still, and those folks have been wanting jugs, too. Between the two I have done a good stroke of business here, and have disposed of nearly all my jug stock."

"We struck that settlement, too," observed Gordon, "and it struck us very hard."

"What do you mean by that?"

Gordon related his experience with the Gonders and the moonshiners, and declared his intention of getting even with them, or with the flatboatmen at least, though it should take "a month of Sundays."

"I am willing to help you in that, if you are in a hurry about it," said Simbell. "We are not a big enough crowd to tackle the moonshiners; but I reckon we can get away with the scamps who robbed you."

"Much obliged to you, Josh; but you have your family and your business to attend to, and I don't propose to let you fight my battles. I shall ask you to lend me a little money, and put me and my friend aboard the first boat you sight going down the river."

"You shall have all the money I can spare, and that will only be paying you a part of what I owe you."

CHAPTER XI.

MORE CASTAWAYS.

It was no easy contract that Mark Hannafin and Silas Birch had undertaken when they proposed to convey Eva Talcott from the burning boat to a place of safety.

Of this fact they were fully aware; but they had carefully measured the dangers and estimated the chances, determining the exact course they should take with coolness and sagacity which, under the circumstances, were worthy of high praise.

They had jumped off on the upper side of the steamer, because most of the people who were struggling in the water were on the lower side, and they hoped to be spared the difficulty and danger of fighting their way through the throng.

Although this proceeding subjected them to the danger of being swept down against the burning mass, the fact that the stern of the boat lay up-stream gave them a chance by vigorous efforts to avoid that peril.

Both were young and active men, as well as excellent swimmers, and both had deprived themselves of a considerable portion of their clothing, so as to have as little incumbrance as possible in the severe task before them.

Yet they had all they could do, and more than once the contract threatened to be too much for their strength and skill.

"Just try to keep your head out of the water," Miss Talcott, and do nothing at all," said Han-

nafin as he grasped her, and she resolutely endeavored to do his bidding.

Instantly the two young men, one on each side of her, struck out boldly and vigorously, quartering across the current, and seeking to reach the sandbar, where they could at least find a footing.

Being partially dammed by the grounded steamer, the current was not as swift there as further out in the stream; but it was strong enough to sweep down to their destruction the helpless ones who had gone overboard on that side, thus removing one element of danger from the two swimmers and their charge.

Eva was at first buoyed up by her clothing, but it soon became wet, seriously retarding the motions of her conductors.

For their part, they exerted themselves yet more vigorously, striving to reach a place of safety before their burden became too heavy for them to manage.

It was to be feared that the best they could do would not be good enough, as the current and the downward suction were so strong as to bear them, in spite of their utmost efforts, toward the bow of the steamer, where the fire was blazing most fiercely.

The fire was what was then to be dreaded, as the wind was blowing up-stream, and the heat near the boat was frightful.

Eva Talcott knew this, and appealed to the young men to desert her when they came within reach of the scorching element.

"Let me go!" she insisted. "It will be as much as you can do to save yourselves. Please let me go!"

"Strike out, Birch!" ordered Mark Hannafin. "Strike out now for all you're worth. One more push, and we're safe!"

They did both strike out, putting all their strength of limb and lung into the push, and in another moment they were safe, or nearly so, as they just shaved the bow of the burning boat, and had but a few more strokes to swim to take them into shoal water.

Those few strokes they swam, and their feet touched the sandy bottom, not a bit to soon, as both the men were exhausted.

In spite of the swift current they managed to keep their feet, and led their charge through the gradually shoaling water, until they were safe on the sandbar.

Though the entire distance had not been more than two hundred yards, it was a wonder that it had been safely accomplished.

So close had they been to destruction that Mark Hannafin, who had been on the lower side, discovered that his hair was scorched.

"It was a close shave, Birch," he said, when he had recovered his breath—"could hardly have been closer—but a miss is as good as a mile, and we are safe."

"And my safety I owe to you two," said Eva, who had seated herself on the sand with her companions.

"We were glad of the chance," observed Mark.

"Thank you; but I know that you risked your lives to save me. What are we to do now?"

"It seems to me, Miss Talcott, that we will not have much trouble in reaching the shore from here. It must be shoal water most of the way between this bar and the bank, and we may hope to be able to wade across. Anyhow, there is no current inside to speak of, and I think we can make the trip without much difficulty."

"Why can we not reach that steamboat which has just come up?"

The boat in question, a stern-wheel craft heavily loaded with cotton, had by this time got as near to the burning steamer as she dared to come, and was busily employed in picking out of the water the few people who had managed to keep afloat.

As for the ill-fated Rowena, she was wrapped in flames from stem to stern, and would soon be burned to the water's edge.

"That steamboat can't come near us," answered Hannafin. "If she dared to risk taking fire from the Rowena the shoal water would not let her approach this sandbar. What do you think about it, Silas?"

"My opinion is the same as yours," said Birch. "I don't think the people on the stern-wheeler are likely to bother about us anyhow, as they have as much as they can attend to. If they should happen to notice us they will conclude that we are safe here, and sure to get help if we want it."

"Besides," suggested Mark, "I know just where we are, and am acquainted with some people living near here, who will be glad to take care of you for my sake, if not for your own."

The stern-wheeler, in fact, did not remain long in the vicinity of the nearly destroyed Rowena, as all she could do there was soon accomplished.

After saving the lives that it was possible to save, she steamed away up the river, without apparently paying any attention to the three people on the sandbar.

Eva Talcott sighed as she saw the steamer leaving the scene, as she was oppressed by saddening thoughts.

The stern-wheeler would soon carry to some port the news of the destruction of the Rowena,

which would speedily be spread over the country, of course reaching her mother in their pleasant Louisiana home.

The list of the saved would be published, and in that list would be neither her name nor Gerald's, though it was known down yonder that they had taken passage on the Rowena.

It was sad to imagine the anguish of her mother at the receipt of this intelligence, with no news from the dear ones to assure her that even one of them had been saved, and this thought troubled Eva far more than her own cheerless and still perilous condition.

Therefore it was almost with a feeling of joy that she welcomed Mark Hannafin's proposal that they should endeavor to cross the remaining stretch of water and reach the shore.

As it had proved to be impossible to get away on the rescuing steamboat, the next best thing would be to find some town or settlement from which she could send news of her safety to her mother.

While Mark was looking for the shoalest water and the best chance to make the crossing, a discovery was made that promised to be of immediate benefit to the little party.

A few people had just come to the shore, having doubtless been attracted by the smoke and fire of the burning steamer, and some of them were preparing to launch a skiff.

They hailed the three on the sandbar, and promised to bring them off directly.

"That is better luck than I had hoped for," said Hannafin, "and now it won't be long before we get into comfortable quarters."

One man got into the skiff as soon as it was launched, and pulled across to the sandbar.

As he turned to get out of the skiff when it landed there, he was at once recognized by Hannafin.

"Hello, Bob Shropshire!" he joyfully exclaimed. "I don't know any man I would be better pleased to see here than you."

Bob Shropshire was a tall and brawny young man, dark featured and roughly clad, and with the look of a person whom one would not care to meet alone on a dark night; but his presence there with a skiff could not be considered otherwise than as a blessing to the party on the sandbar.

"Is it really you, Mr. Hannafin?" he answered. "You're about the last man I'd ha' thort o' strikin' hyar. Was you aboard o' that boat?"

"Of course I was, and so were my friends here."

"You're all durned lucky to git away alive, I should say. We-uns smelt the smoke and saw the light, and we heard that a steamboat was burnin' up hyar, and so we hurried down to see what we could do; but none of us had the faintest notion o' findin' you in this scrape. Do you reckon there's a chance to pick up anybody else?"

"Not the least chance, Bob. The stern wheel-er up yonder took aboard all that could be got hold of, and the rest are long since past saving."

"Any goods or anythin' floatin' about?"

"No, indeed. The fire has got them all. If your skiff will carry us, Bob, we will get in and let you take us across."

"The skiff 'll kerry you well enough. Help the lady in, and one o' you sit forrard."

The three passengers took their places carefully, and in a few moments brawny Bob Shropshire had ferried them safely to the shore, where they climbed the bank, and Bob and his friends hauled the skiff up after them.

Two other Shropshires were there, an old man and a young one, and besides these there were two boys and a girl, rustics of the backwoods type, who stared stupidly at the strangers, and had not a word to say.

"If I remember right, Bob," said Hannafin, "it must be as much as a mile from here to your place. How can we go out there? Is there any way to get a team to carry us?"

"One of us mought go up to the house and git a team, or a hoss for the lady, anyhow."

"Is it worth while to take so much trouble and waste so much time?" inquired Eva. "For my part, I feel able to walk a mile or so, and that will be better than waiting here."

After a little discussion it was agreed that the attempt should be made, and the three cast-aways with the three Shropshires set out to walk through the woods.

The tramp was an unpleasant one, to say the least of it, especially for the young lady, whose wet clothing made walking very disagreeable for her; but it was not as bad as it might have been, as the forest trees gave a grateful shade, and the road taken by the party was little traveled and therefore not at all dusty.

So Eva trudged along heroically, her companions halting now and then to allow her to rest, and at about the middle of the afternoon they reached the abode of the Shropshires.

This was a long and low log house, one of the double variety—that is to say, it consisted of two similar houses, the wide space between them being roofed and floored, so as to form an open hall.

There was no fencing about the house, and but little appearance of cultivation or any sort of farm work in sight.

In fact, the house wore a slouchy and uncared-

for look, as if it were but a temporary abiding-place, and the present occupants had no interest in their surroundings.

CHAPTER XII.

THE NERVE "DOWN YONDER."

TALCOTT'S LANDING was not so called because it was in any sense a town, as it was merely a landing, the only buildings in sight, besides those connected with the Talcott mansion, being a cotton press and a general store near the river-bank.

It was located in a big bend of the Mississippi, with a large island in front of it, and on all sides but one a fertile and well-cultivated plantation.

The Talcott mansion was a conspicuous object from the river, and was generally admired, not because it was a magnificent structure, but because it was large, roomy and otherwise attractive, having the appearance of a dwelling exactly suited to the country and the climate.

It was, indeed, quite too large for the needs of Mrs. Talcott and her two children, especially as one of them had been absent from home during the greater part of three years, and the other was then away on a trip that combined business with pleasure.

When they were both at home, however, the big house was usually filled with guests, and there was a jolly time on the Talcott plantation.

Mrs. Talcott had been a widow with two children when she married Colonel Talcott, a very wealthy but somewhat ancient widower with no children, and the match was not generally approved of by the old and aristocratic families of the neighborhood, to whom the new Mrs. Talcott was a nobody whom the old gentleman, as they said, picked up somewhere at the north.

Yet it had been in every respect and to all concerned a most happy marriage, and Mrs. Talcott, gentle, ladylike, and fully equal to her position, had soon succeeded in becoming a general favorite, even among those who envied her.

Colonel Talcott had not only been very fond of his wife, but had loved her children as if they were his own, his affection for them being such that he had caused them to take his name, and by his will had given them all his property, reserving the use of the house and a sufficient income for Mrs. Talcott during her life.

One of the closest friends of Mrs. Talcott, if not the very closest, was Colonel Bastrop, a planter living near by, who was a widower with one grown son.

It was supposed by some that he aspired to the hand of the widow; but it became fully and fairly known that she was decidedly opposed to this idea of taking a third husband, and Colonel Bastrop abandoned his aspirations, if he had any, in favor of his son Lawrence, who was known to be infatuated with Eva Talcott.

So Mrs. Talcott, at the time we meet her, was a well-preserved and still handsome matron, who wanted nothing in the world but to see her children safe at home.

It was uneasiness concerning them that caused her to be seated on the veranda, overlooking the river, anxiously watching Colonel Bastrop and his son as they rode up to the house.

Aside from any such personal feeling, they were both well worth looking at, the father being a fine-looking man of middle age, and Lawrence a handsome young fellow of twenty-three.

"Any news yet, colonel?" she asked as they came up on the veranda after hitching their horses.

"I have brought none, my dear Mrs. Talcott. Lawrence and I rode over to ask if you have received any, and to wait for the Vicksburg packet, which surely ought to bring some tidings of the absent ones. I am glad to see you looking so well, though there is a cloud upon your face which I would willingly banish."

"I try to banish it, Colonel Bastrop, but all my efforts are in vain. I must confess that I am becoming very uneasy about my children."

"Would that there were no cause for your uneasiness; but I am afraid that there is, as the same feeling afflicts me. Is it certain that they left Louisville on the Rowena?"

"There can scarcely be a doubt of that. They both wrote that they had engaged their passage on that boat, and if they had changed their minds they would have written again. Is it possible that the Rowena has gone down the river?"

"With those two on board, and without landing here? Quite impossible, my dear lady. Besides, there has been a good watch kept on the river, and at the present stage of water no boats go on the other side of the island. No, madam, it is safe to say that the Rowena has not passed Talcott's Landing."

"But she is surely due here."

"I am sorry to say that she is more than due. According to the best information I can get, she should have been here, at the very latest, two days ago."

Lawrence Bastrop undertook to say that steamboats from up the river were often delayed by discharging and taking on freight, by grounding, and by various other contingencies that must be allowed for; but his well-meant ef-

forts did not tend to restore the confidence of the older people.

The delay had already been too great to be accounted for by the necessities of business, and the river was at too good a stage to admit the supposition of grounding.

"I am afraid that there has been a disaster," said Mrs. Talcott in a suppressed tone. "Is the Rowena regarded as a safe boat?"

"As safe as any," answered Colonel Bastrop. "She is one of the best on the river."

A steamboat whistle sounded, and Mrs. Talcott started, her painful excitement driving the blood from her face.

"Calm yourself, my dear lady," entreated her old friend. "You may need all your fortitude. That whistle sounded from down the river, and it must be the packet that is coming in."

Directly there came puffing into the bend from below a boat which was at once recognized as the Vicksburg packet.

"I will go down to the landing, Mrs. Talcott," said Colonel Bastrop, "and we will soon get the news if there is any to be had."

"Better let me run down there, father," insisted Lawrence. "I am lighter on the heels than you are. Stay here and comfort Mrs. Talcott; and I will bring up what letters and packages there are as soon as possible."

"Be sure to get a paper from the boat," ordered his father, and Lawrence hastened away.

The packet shoved her nose in at the bank, transacted her business at the little landing, and speedily steamed away, and shortly Lawrence Bastrop came back to the house at his fastest walk.

"Here are a couple of letters for you, father," said he; "but they must be business letters; and here is one for Mrs. Talcott, which seems to be in the same category, and that is all there was for any of us."

"Did you get a paper?" demanded Colonel Bastrop.

"Yes, sir, I got the Vicksburg Herald. I will look it over immediately. Perhaps it will have some news that will interest us."

Colonel Bastrop began to open his letters a little nervously, and Lawrence proceeded to glance at the paper, anxiously watched by Mrs. Talcott.

Hardly had he opened the sheet when there came such a sudden and startling change over his face as drew a sharp cry from Mrs. Talcott; and compelled Colonel Bastrop to look up in alarm.

"What is the matter, my son?" demanded the old gentleman.

Lawrence was not able to answer immediately, and when he did speak his voice was feeble and broken.

"This is terrible," he said, "Mrs. Talcott; you must try to control yourself."

"What has happened?"

"The worst, I am afraid. The Rowena has been destroyed by fire, and the loss of life was frightful. I have not yet read the account; but the headlines tell the story."

"But some were saved, Lawrence," insisted his father.

"Yes, sir. Here is a list of the saved, as far as they are known, and the names we want to find are not there."

"Is there a list of the lost?"

"Only a small one. You know how that is. A few names, and those of our friends are not among them."

Of course it was so, and it could not be otherwise. Just as it always is when a river steamer is destroyed by fire or explosion—the passenger list burned with the boat or sunk in the safe, the clerk among the lost, and no way of getting at the names of the missing, except through the recollections of the saved, who necessarily know little about their fellow passengers.

So the news came to many homes, arriving late and in an unlooked for manner, giving assurance only of a calamity that could not be measured.

Scarcely any knowledge but that of those who were sure that their loved ones had been on board the ill-fated boat, and among such unfortunates Mrs. Talcott was to be reckoned.

She had borne the disclosure bravely up to the words last uttered by Lawrence Bastrop, showing only a white face full of horror and despair; but then the strain became too great for her, and she fainted.

The servants were hastily called, and while they were attending to their stricken mistress Lawrence Bastrop read to his father the newspaper account of the Rowena disaster.

There was little to add to the information he had already given, except the location of the calamity, and the fact that all the passengers who were known to be saved had been taken to Memphis on the rescuing steamer.

When Mrs. Talcott had recovered from her swoon, her friends spoke of action at once, believing that to be better calculated to comfort her than any mere verbal sympathy.

"Do you suppose it is possible that either of my children can have escaped?" she asked.

"There is at least a chance of the safety of both of them," answered Colonel Bastrop. "Gerald is a strong and active young man, and we

have always regarded Eva as well able to take care of herself. The newspaper account is very meager, and no positive opinions can be based upon it."

"But, Colonel Bastrop, if they were alive, or either of them, we surely would hear from them in some way."

"Possibly not. If they escaped to the shore, it is quite likely that they found themselves far from any telegraph wire. I mean to get ready at once, and will go as speedily as possible to Memphis, and from there to the place where the disaster occurred. I will institute a thorough search, telegraphing you as soon as I get any news whatever, and will arrange for having my telegrams forwarded to you without any delay."

"I will go with you, father," declared Lawrence.

"It does not seem to be necessary, my son. I suppose I am able to do all that can be done."

"Do you suppose, sir, that I can remain here inactive while there is this uncertainty about the fate of Eva Talcott? I could not bear that."

Mrs. Talcott said that she would prefer that Lawrence should go with his father, and it was settled that he should do so.

CHAPTER XIII.

STRIKING A CLEW.

GRAY GORDON and Gerald Talcott reached Memphis in somewhat better shape than they had shown when they left Josh Simbell's flat-boat, and immediately upon their arrival they were struck by the news of the loss of the Rowena.

This was a terrible blow to Gerald, and his old friend seemed to feel it scarcely less than himself; but Gordon's head was clear, and he at once applied himself to the task of getting hold of the facts of the disaster and determining what was best to be done.

The published accounts were of little value to him in this investigation, as there was no mention in them of Eva Talcott, nor any hint by which her fate could be guessed at—except, of course, the overwhelming probability that she must have been lost, as she was not known to have been saved.

If she was dead, however, her body might be found, and, whether she was living or dead, it was necessary to search for her as soon as possible.

"We know just where the boat was burned," said Gordon, "and we can easily get there. It is too late to start to-day; but we will go down there in the morning as soon as we can get away."

"Do you think there is a chance that my sister may be safe?" asked Gerald.

"Of course there is a chance, and a good chance, too. It always happens after such a disaster that people turn up at unexpected places and in unexpected ways. The loss of life is never near as great as at first reported, as the missing keep coming forward as they do after a big battle."

"Then we must go to work at once on the chances."

"That is just what we are going to do; but the first thing necessary is for you to get word of your safety to your mother in the speediest possible manner, and tell her what you are about here. We will need money, too, and I shall send for some immediately."

This part of the programme was quickly carried out, and then the two friends hastened to procure some clothing that they needed, and to complete their outfit by the purchase of revolvers and ammunition, using for those purposes the greater part of the money that Gordon had got from Josh Simbell.

The next thing was to hunt up such of the Rowena survivors as were still in the city, and to make inquiries among them in the hope of learning something concerning Eva Talcott.

In the course of this quest they came across Hank Byers, the gambler who had enlightened Mark Hannafin and Silas Birch as to the standing of "Ben Gray," and from him they secured highly interesting and important information.

Before they could get anything out of him, however, they were obliged to satisfy his own curiosity, as his amazement at seeing them there was extreme.

"How on earth did you two happen to turn up here?" he demanded. "What does this mean?"

"What does what mean?" answered Gordon.

"You were missed from the Rowena the night before she was burned, and there was the deuce of an excitement about you. Everybody supposed that you had been lost overboard, and there was no doubt that you were dead. Please explain that little mystery."

"Oh, that didn't amount to much. We took a notion to suicide, you see, and jumped overboard together. Then we repented and swam ashore."

"I take that in easy, and only wonder that you didn't fly up to the moon while you were about it. You are a queer customer, Gray Gordon, and I suppose there is no use in trying to squeeze the truth out of you."

"Suppose you give me a chance to operate on you, then. You must have been on the Rowena when she was destroyed. How did you get out of the scrape?"

"Oh, that didn't amount to much," answered Byers, copying the style of the old man. "I just dived under the burning boat, and swam up here to Memphis."

Gray Gordon was visibly annoyed at being "picked up" in this fashion.

"I will be greatly obliged to you if you will come down to facts," said he. "My young friend here, as I suppose you know, had a sister on the Rowena, and every fact that we can learn may have a bearing on her fate."

"That makes it a serious business," replied Hank Byers, "and you are welcome to all the facts I have been able to get hold of. As regards myself, I have been mixed up in so many river disasters that I always know just what to do, and I am one of the Lord's lucky ones, anyhow. I had a cool head on my shoulders, and I kept out of the way of the fire as well as I could, and watched my chances. When the stern-wheel boat came near enough, I jumped into the water and swam to her."

"What became of Mark Hannafin?" inquired Gordon.

"That is just what I was going to tell you about. I would hate to raise any false hopes; but I should not be a bit surprised if the young lady you spoke of is alive and well."

"Bless you for that!" exclaimed Gerald; but Gordon wanted to know what grounds Byers had for his statement.

"Of course the young lady was at the stern of the boat, and I heard Mark Hannafin speak to Silas Birch of a plan he had formed for saving her, and then they both started aft. I was too busy with looking after Hank Byers to take any further notice of them, and I saw nothing more until I had got aboard the stern-wheeler."

"What did you see then?" eagerly asked Gerald.

"On a sand-bar out in the water, near which the Rowena had grounded, I saw three people—two men and a woman—and I am quite sure that one of the men was Mark Hannafin. It is reasonable to suppose that the woman was the young lady of whom we have been speaking."

This was great news, and the two friends were heartily thankful for it.

"Mr. Byers," said Gordon, "you are the best man I have met in a long time. You are an angel in the disguise of a card-sharp. You have lightened the heart of my young friend, and have done me a great favor. We both thank you for the good news you have given us, and hope that there may be no drawback to it."

"I hope so, too," answered Byers, "and I can only say that I have given you the best I had in the shop."

Gordon and Gerald discussed the situation hopefully when their informant had left them, and were more than ever of the opinion that immediate action on their part was necessary.

Though it was highly probable that Eva's life had been saved, it was to be supposed that she was under the control of Mark Hannafin, whose designs or intentions with regard to her were well known to Gerald.

Hannafin's character and purposes, as understood by Gerald and his old friend, were not such as to convince them that Eva, if alive, was entirely safe.

"If he has saved my sister's life," said the young man, "that will offset his attempt to murder me; but it will go no further than that, and we want to get to her as soon as possible."

"That is understood," answered Gordon; "but I want you to know, my boy, that I am an intensely practical man, with not a bit of sentiment about me, and here comes in the money question. It goes without saying that we will need more money than we have got."

"When I telegraphed to my mother," suggested Gerald, "I told her to send me some money."

"I telegraphed to my bankers to send me some, too, and I think the lightning is likely to strike me sooner than it will you; but I am afraid that it won't strike either of us soon enough, and I mean to try another scheme."

"What is that?"

"I have about twenty dollars left of the money I got from Josh Simbell, and I am going to match it against a faro game in this town, and either make or break to-night."

"I don't think you are likely to break, Mr. Gordon, judging by your luck and skill at poker."

"I don't think I am, either. If I did I would not risk my money. I feel, too, like the boy who was after the ground-hog—I am out of meat and have got to win."

"May I go with you?"

"Not much. In fact, my boy, not a bit of it. I am a hardened wretch, and understand just what I am about, while you are supposed to be young and innocent, and I have reason to know that you are an easy prey for sharpers. No, Gerald, if you don't feel like sleeping, go to the hotel and quietly wait for me there. For your mother's sake, as well as for your sister's, I want you to leave cards and liquor alone until this business is settled."

Gerald promised to obey the injunctions of his old friend, and Gray Gordon set out to attend to his "business."

CHAPTER XIV.

A STREAK OF LUCK.

GORDON was acquainted with the streets of Memphis, but did not know what may be styled the secrets of the city, and therefore, finding himself comparatively a stranger in a strange place, he did not know where to go to find the "business" he was seeking.

Luckily he again met Hank Byers, who willingly put him on the track when he stated his desire.

"I've got a few dollars left," said he, "and want to blow them in at a faro game, if I can find one that will stand the racket."

"That's easy enough to do," answered Byers. "If you will accept me as a steerer, I will take you to Mrs. Hannafin's den."

"Hannafin?" ejaculated Gordon, as if the name was a surprise to him.

"You know Mark Hannafin, one of the men you played poker with on the Rowena. It is his mother who keeps this place, and there is not a more decent game in town."

"She is a widow, I suppose?"

"A sort of widow; but I can't exactly say how that is. I am not sure whether her husband is dead or it is a case of separation. He was Jim Hannafin, I have heard, a man who was well known on the river some years ago, and there is a queer story about him, though I can't pretend to give you the rights of it."

"Well, I don't need to worry about bygones when I am going to fight the tiger. Are you interested in that game, Mr. Byers?"

"I? Not a dollar's worth."

"And you don't care whether the bank wins or loses?"

"I believe I would prefer to see it lose, as that tiger has clawed me pretty badly whenever I have stopped in Memphis."

"Now is your chance to get even," observed Gordon. "I will give you a straight tip—just follow my lead to-night, and you will put dollars in your pocket."

"Why so? Do you think you are going to win?"

"Sure of it."

"If you have got an infallible system, or have struck a sign that never misses, you are gone up."

"I have nothing of the sort. I am spinning this for you as fine as silk. I have a lucky fit on this night, and it is pure luck that is going to carry me through. I need money, you see, and must have it right away."

"You speak as if the bank was owing you the money."

"It is going to pay me the money pretty soon, and if you want a share you had better follow my lead. This is one of my lucky times, I tell you. All I ask of you, Byers, is to introduce me as a friend from up the country. Then leave me alone and let me work the scheme to suit myself."

"Do you mean to pass yourself off as a 'gray'?"

"Perhaps so; but I can assure you that nobody will play a brace game on me."

Mrs. Hannafin's "place" was found to be a few quiet and apparently respectable rooms over a saloon.

It could hardly fail to be quiet, as the proprietress was always there, and her presence was supposed to be sufficient to insure order.

Byers introduced his companion as "Mr. Gordon, a friend of mine from up the country, who wanted to find a faro game."

Mrs. Hannafin, who appeared to be a pale-faced and somewhat careworn woman on the shady side of forty, but stylish in her apparel and energetic in her manner, looked sharply at the stranger as she greeted him.

"Your friend is welcome, Hank," she said, "and we will try to accommodate him. He will find a square game here, as this bank is satisfied with its percentage."

At the faro-table a rather monotonous game was in progress, a few men betting small amounts as the cards were dealt in a perfunctory manner, when Gray Gordon seated himself before the "lay-out" and looked up at the dealer.

"Is this the sure-enough tiger?" he inquired. "If it is, I want to ruffle the fur of the animal."

"Proceed to ruffle," responded the dealer. "This is the genuine Royal Bengal, and you may tangle your hands in his hair to your heart's content. If he scratches or bites, it is not the fault of the keeper."

With a smile at this fair warning, the man from up-country proceeded to "tangle," and he began and continued the performance in a style that astonished the dealer and everybody else in the room.

It was as he told Byers—he had a lucky fit on, and was bound to win.

There did not seem to be any plan or system in his betting, as he placed his money recklessly on one card or another as the whim seemed to strike him, but he won from the start and kept

on winning, the turn being called against him but once while he sat there.

The other players ceased making their small bets to watch the bigger game, and the contest settled down to a struggle between the bank and the stranger.

Hank Byers did not at first take advantage of the "point" that his companion had given him, but soon opened his eyes to Gordon's extraordinary run of luck, and hastened to secure a share of it by following the lead of the lucky player.

He was rather late, however, in coming to this conclusion, and did not get the full benefit he had hoped for from the run, as Gordon, when he had a goodly pile of big chips before him, called quits.

"I don't want to break this bank," he said. "A man needn't make a hog of himself because he happens to strike a streak of luck, and I am going to cash in my chips."

This was speedily done, and the dealer, as he shoved the money over to the stranger, expressed the hope that he would call again and give the bank a chance.

As Gordon rose from his seat and sauntered away, he was accosted by Mrs. Hannafin, who regarded him smilingly and with evident interest.

"You have been very lucky to-night," said she. "I wish you would favor me with a few minutes conversation."

"With pleasure," answered Gordon, and he excused himself to Hank Byers, who left the house.

Mrs. Hannafin led the way into another room, which was comfortably as well as handsomely furnished, and to a table in a corner.

The table suggested an idea to Gordon, and he acted on it at once.

"Will you allow me to order a bottle of wine?" he asked, "and will you kindly help me empty it?"

"Certainly," she answered, as she sounded a bell, and the order was given.

"Yes, Mrs. Hannafin," observed Gordon, as he raised his glass and nodded, "I have been very lucky to-night. 'A fool for luck,' as the old saying goes."

"But you are no fool," she replied.

"Perhaps I am not, in some things. I was smart enough to know that I had a lucky fit on and to take advantage of it, and this is where my meanness comes in."

"What meanness?"

"I was sure that I would win, you see, before I came in here, and for a man to buck against your bank when he has a sure thing is too much like robbing the widow and orphan. The fact is, madam, that I needed a certain sum of money, and wanted it right away. I have got it, you know, but I shall regard it as a loan."

"You might have got a loan here, Mr. Gordon, without taking so much trouble."

"Indeed! I would not have thought of asking such a favor from a stranger."

"You are not a stranger to me, sir—at least, I know you well by reputation. I have often heard of Gray Gordon, and have had a curiosity to see him. You have been mentioned to me as a wealthy old sport, who occasionally takes a trip on the river and makes things hot for the boys."

"I am sorry to learn that I am so well known," remarked Gordon. "If I am getting famous, I shall have to haul in my horns and quit that line of business."

"Are you a Californian?" inquired Mrs. Hannafin.

"I have lived in California."

"Was it there that you made your fortune?"

"Such as it is, I picked it up there."

"By gambling?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"You must be a champion card-sharp."

"Not a bit of it. I scarcely touched a card while I was on the Pacific Coast."

"I don't understand you, Mr. Gordon. You have just told me that you made your money by gambling."

"And so I did, but there is more than one kind, you see. Compared with gambling in stocks, card-sharping is such a picayune and small potato business that it is not worth speaking of. That is the sort of scheme to make or break on. Mining stocks were my strong hold, and I won right along."

"I wish I could strike something of the sort. I am tired of keeping such a place as this."

"Do you have to run it all alone?" sympathetically inquired Gordon. "Are you a widow then?"

"I suppose I may pass for a widow. My husband is dead to me."

"Ah! some family unpleasantness, I suppose?"

"Nothing of the kind. It was a case of murder. My husband was killed, you see."

"Then he must be dead to all the world as well as to you," suggested Gordon.

"I can't exactly say that he is. It is a very strange affair. Do you care to hear the story?"

"I am deeply interested, madam."

"My son Mark is now nearly twenty-five years old, and that makes me consider myself an old woman. Years ago, when Mark was a

little fellow, we lived in a cottage below Covington, and Jim Hannafin, my husband, who was one of the smartest sports on the river, used to come to see us as often as he could.

"One night, when he had promised us a visit, he did not come as soon as I expected him, and I walked out to meet him."

"The road ran through a piece of woods near my cottage, and just as I got to that piece of woods I heard two shots, one a little after the other."

"I was scared and dazed at first, connecting the shots with my husband's visit, and fearing that he had been waylaid and murdered; but I soon plucked up courage and ran in the direction from which the sounds had come."

"Pretty soon I stopped, worse than dazed and shaking with fear, for in a little glade there, into which the moonlight came freely, lay my husband on the ground, and over him stood a man with a pistol in his hand."

"I did not dare to stir until that man went away; but as soon as he was out of sight I hurried to my husband, and found him dead, as I supposed."

"I ran home and got help and sent for a doctor, and we took him to the house, and after a while he came to his senses."

"Then he lived?" exclaimed Gordon.

"Yes, he lived, after a fashion. The doctor said that the bullet had injured his brain, and it had certainly upset him completely. He got well, strong and hearty, but was never the same man again."

"How was he changed?"

"All his former life had gone from him, and he had no remembrance of it at all. He knew nothing of his wife or his boy, and I was to him only a kind stranger who was taking care of him. Though he had been a card-sharp for years, after that he did not know one card from another, and did not want to know anything about them."

"What became of him?" inquired Gordon.

"I had some money laid away that he had given me, and I sold my place and the furniture and brought him down here, thinking that a change of air and climate would help him. But he was the same here that he was up there. He seemed to be fond of me and Mark, but when we claimed to be his wife and son he got angry, and at last he left us. He is knocking about somewhere now, busy at one thing and another, and making a good living for himself, as I understand."

"That is a strange case," observed Gordon, after a little reflection. "I suppose that with the rest of his forgetting he had forgotten his own name. If so, what name does he go by now?"

"When he came to his senses after he was shot, I told him he had got a rap on his head, and the word stuck to him. Since then he has called himself Rapp, and believes it to be his name."

This was highly interesting information to Gordon, whom it carried back at once to the old moonshiner who had helped the Gonders rob him; but he made no mention of that affair to Mrs. Hannafin.

"Did you know the man who shot your husband?" he inquired.

"He was a stranger to me; but I carried away a picture of him in my mind, and from the description I could give I learned that he was a river sport, a man who had been a particular friend of Jim's."

"What was his name?"

"Josiah Holcomb. I vowed then that I would hunt him down and kill him because he attempted to murder my husband."

"Is it not possible that he shot him in a fair fight?"

"He shot him, and that is enough. But the man disappeared, and I have never seen him since. I have heard that he is dead."

It might have been proper for Gray Gordon to remark just then that death buries all enmities; but he did not say it. In fact, he said nothing at all for some minutes, but gazed abstractedly at the glass which he had just emptied. Then he switched off on another subject.

"So Mark Hannafin is a son of yours. I have met him."

"Quite likely, sir, as he spends most of his time on the river."

"Did you know that he was aboard the Rowena when she burned?"

"Oh, yes, I knew that. How did you know it?"

"I was on the boat with him."

"How did you escape?"

"Simply by leaving the boat the night before she was lost. Have you no uneasiness about your son?"

"None at all. I am quite sure that he is safe."

"Where is he now?"

"That is more than I can tell you; but he is all right. Are you going, then, Mr. Gordon? I am glad you came, though you have taken a little money from the bank. I don't know why I have told you my sad story, unless it was because I was interested in you."

"It was very interesting to me, I assure you."

"Thank you, and I hope you will not forget to call here when you are in town."

"I surely shall not forget you, Mrs. Hannafin."

CHAPTER XV.

THE HOTEL SHROPSHIRE.

THOUGH Eva Talcott did not at all fancy the appearance of the Shropshires or their home, there was clearly nothing for her to do but to go on with her friends and make herself as comfortable as she could under the circumstances.

Her hosts, although their dress and manners were rough, indeed, and their speech was calculated to excite suspicion, might be only poor and miserable rustics, none the less honest because of their poverty and ignorance.

It was to be supposed, also, that Mark Hannafin, in spite of his previous unpleasant attentions, must mean well toward her, as he had saved her life at the risk of his own.

Moreover, she was tired and worn out—so utterly exhausted when she reached the house that she could go no further, and rest was an absolute necessity to her.

So she entered the log house, and was ushered into a large room which was nearly bare of furniture, conveying the same idea of temporary habitation that was suggested by the outside of the establishment.

There she found two persons, a woman of somewhat elderly appearance and a young girl.

The woman, coarsely clad and slatternly, had the same look of roughness and toughness that distinguished the male Shropshires; but the girl was different.

She seemed to be a maiden of sixteen, and, although dressed in a cheap calico gown that had been cut without any special regard to style or fit, she was neat and graceful to look at, with a sweet and comely face that was rendered more interesting by the shade of sadness that covered it, and by the mournful gaze of her large brown eyes.

Mark Hannafin, who seemed to be in very good spirits just then, took upon himself the part of master of ceremonies, and proceeded to make Eva acquainted with the members of the household.

"This old gentleman, Miss Talcott," said he, is Mr. Enoch Shropshire, generally called Uncle Enoch, and this is his wife, who is favorably known in these parts as Aunt Eliza. You are acquainted with Bob Shropshire, who took us off the sand-bar in his skiff, and this young fellow is his brother Ben."

"There is one other, Mr. Hannafin," suggested Eva.

"Oh, yes, Linda is the sister of Bob and Ben. She is a good girl, and means well."

Linda blushed faintly at this somewhat equivocal commendation; but she was the only one of the group to whom Eva gave her hand.

Mark Hannafin explained the cause and manner of the arrival there of himself and Silas Birch, with the young lady, and "Aunt Eliza" at once took, or appeared to take, a motherly interest in Eva.

"You look to be all worn out, my dear," said she, "and no wonder, arter what you've been through. You must go right up-stairs, and lay down thar and rest, while I take care o' your things and put 'em in shape to wear."

"I shall be glad to do so," answered Eva; "but there is one thing that must first be attended to, if possible. Mr. Hannafin, you have saved my life."

"Only helped, Miss Talcott."

"I want to beg you to increase the obligation under which you have placed me."

"Whatever I can do to please you will be cheerfully done."

"Of course my mother will hear of the burning of that boat, and I am above all things anxious that she should get the news of my safety as soon as possible."

"Tell me what to say and how to send it, and I will do my best to get the news to your mother."

"If I can have a bit of paper, I will write a dispatch."

But the Shropshires were anything but literary, and there was not a scrap of white paper to be found in the house—not as much as the fly-leaf of an old book.

Mark Hannafin had a note-book in his pocket; but it was so badly soaked with water as to be worthless, and some time would be required to dry it.

"I have a very good memory, Miss Talcott," said he. "Tell me what you wish to say, and give me the necessary directions, and I will be sure to remember."

"I only want to tell her that I am alive and well," answered Eva, and to this she added her mother's name and address, with the name of the telegraph station nearest to Talcott's Landing, from which the dispatch would be forwarded.

"I do not yet know how or when this can be sent," said Hannafin; "but you may rely upon me to do my best to get it off as speedily as possible."

As a matter of fact, no such dispatch was ever sent.

Perhaps the young man's intentions were

good, though there may be a doubt on that point; but it was a long distance from the Shropshire habitation to a telegraph line, and before he could determine what it would be best to do in regard to the dispatch, something occurred that upset the arrangements of all the people under that roof.

Eva Talcott, however, could not question the words or intentions of the man who had saved her life, and upon whom she must depend for all the assistance she could hope to get in her time of trouble.

Believing that she had done all that it was possible to do under the circumstances, she painfully followed "Aunt Eliza" up the ladder-like stairs that led to the room which she was to occupy.

This was a mere garret, furnished only with a rude bedstead, a husk mattress and a scanty supply of bed-clothing, and it would have been very hot and stuffy, but for an opening at the end that let the air in freely.

Mrs. Shropshire directed her guest to take off her wet clothing giving her a coarse garment to wear in the mean time.

In removing her dress Eva was careful to secure the pocketbook which it contained, and she fancied that her hostess cast a wolfish look at that article.

"All you've got to do now, my dear," said the old woman, "is jest to lay down and rest while I dry your things and fix 'em. After a while I'll bring you up suthin' to eat; but I reckon you need a good sleep more'n anythin' else."

Linda Shropshire had silently followed her mother and the guest up to the loft, and she stood there in the doorway of the garret room, her hands crossed before her, and her big brown eyes wide open as she stared at the fair stranger.

The old woman perceived her there, and her eyes snapped with sudden anger.

"Wot you deim' thar, Linda?" she fiercely demanded. "Nobody told you to come up yer. I can't have you standin' round and botherin' the lady. Git out, now! Git!"

With a cry that was like a wail the girl turned and fled.

It was evident to Eva that Linda was not a pet in her own family; but she said nothing, as she was not able just then to take anybody's part—not even her own.

"Aunt Eliza" bundled up her guest's wet clothing and carried it away, after a parting injunction to keep quiet and go to sleep.

Eva was willing enough to obey this injunction, but feared that she would not be able to.

As for going to bed and keeping quiet, there was nothing else for her to do; but she was oppressed by so many painful thoughts—grief for the mysterious loss of her brothers, anxiety concerning her mother and doubt and perplexity about her own position—that it did not seem possible for her to lose her senses in sleep.

Nature, however, has her rights, and is bound to assert them.

The young lady was so completely overcome by nervous exhaustion, as well as by fatigue, that she could not have withstood the pressure if she had desired to.

With a prayer on her lips she fell asleep, and she slept long and soundly.

It was dark when she awoke, and then she was aroused by Mrs. Shropshire, who brought some supper and a light, the light being a cup of grease with a lighted wick swimming in it.

The supper was of poor quality, both in material and in cookery, being nothing but bacon and corn bread, with a mixture that could never pass for coffee among civilized people; but Eva had awoke with an appetite, and just then that homely food was as acceptable to her as the choice viands of the Rowena.

"I reckon you'll do now," said the old woman as she watched the disappearance of the victuals. Indeed there was quite a change in Eva.

Her sleep had refreshed her, and her supper invigorated her, and she felt so strong and well, so sound of body and so clear of mind, that she began to take a lively interest in her own affairs.

"Has Mr. Hannafin sent off my dispatch, Mrs. Shropshire?" she asked.

"Don't know nothin' 'bout no dispatches," grunted the old woman. "That young man has gone off some'eres, and mebbe that's wot he's gone after."

"I hope so, indeed, but I would be glad to know. When can I have my clothes?"

"You won't need 'em afore mornin', and they'll be ready then. You've eat a good supper, my dear, and all you've got to do is to lay right down and take things easy."

Having settled this point to her own satisfaction, the old woman went away, carrying off the light as well as the dishes.

CHAPTER XVI.

EVA TALCOTT'S PERIL.

LEFT in darkness and solitude to her own reflections, Eva Talcott became very restless; but she could not help admitting that "Aunt Eliza" had spoken the truth.

No matter how great her uneasiness and anxiety might be, in her present scarcity of apparel it was clearly impossible for her to make a move in any direction, and all she could do was to "stay put" and endeavor to make the best of adverse circumstances.

She was naturally anxious, among other matters, to know whether the promised message had been sent to her mother; but there was no way of finding that out until Mark Hannafin should see fit to give her the information, and he was understood to be away just then.

She hoped that he was absent on her errand, but was forced to confess to an uneasy feeling of doubt on that point.

She worried helplessly over these matters, occasionally dropping into a doze; but her sleeping moments were more painful than her waking thoughts, and finally she arose and went to the opening at the end of the loft, to look out and breathe the night air.

She had been there but a little while when she heard the voices of men approaching the house, and soon recognized the speakers as Mark Hannafin and his friend Silas Birch.

They were evidently carrying on a conversation which they wished to keep from the ears of the Shropshires, as they did not go into the house, but came around to the end, stopping directly under the opening at which the young lady was stationed.

Eva wanted to call to Hannafin and ask him if he had sent her message; but modesty at first forbade the attempt, and after a while she had a yet stronger reason for keeping silence.

Though the two men spoke in low tones, the night was so still, and she listened so intently, that she could hear nearly every word that was said.

"This is a queer den that you have brought us to, Mark," Birch was saying, "and it's a queer lot of beasts that inhabit it. I don't like the looks of things here a bit."

"It is the only place we could come to," answered Hannafin.

"That won't do, and you know it won't. We might have got away on that stern-wheel boat if we had tried; but you made a point of coming to this place, as you had friends here. Tough lot of friends, these are."

"Better than no friends, though."

"I doubt it. In any respectable town they would be locked up as vagrants, because they can show no visible means of support. How do they get their living? Not by farming, as anybody can see with half an eye. They have the look of scoundrels who would kill a man to rob him of half a dollar—all except the girl, and she seems to be strangely out of place here. What's the matter with her, Mark?"

"Nothing, as far as I know. Her folks say that she hasn't got good sense; but perhaps that is because she won't fall in with their ways."

"What are their ways? Ways of crookedness, I'd bet high. What is their special line of rascality? Is it horse-stealing, or are they mean enough to come down to sheep-stealing?"

"Leave those people alone, Silas, and don't bother your head about them."

"I mean to leave them alone as soon as I can, and I assure you that I would never have stirred a step from the river-bank with them, if it hadn't been for your sake. What are you going to do with the young lady, Mark?"

"I am going to marry her, of course."

"That is easier said than done."

"It is bound to be done, though, and that is why I brought her here. I am madly in love with her, Silas, and she has a fine fortune of her own, too."

"The fine fortune may excuse the love craze, if you are sure of getting it. It is a very good scheme, Mark, if it can be made to work, and I suppose you know what you mean to do. Of course it must be a lawful marriage, or you miss the fortune. How do you expect to persuade the young lady to consent to that?"

"I can't say exactly. It will depend somewhat on circumstances. I have the road roughly blazed out, but haven't brought my plan down to a fine point yet. I have gone in to win, Silas, and mean to play the game for all it is worth."

"And you don't mean to let anything stand in your light, if you can shove it aside. That is straight business, Mark. Since you have put her brother out of the way, I suppose you think you have the game in your own hands."

Mark Hannafin hastened to resent this imputation.

"What do you mean," he demanded, "by saying that I put her brother out of the way?"

"Don't give me anything soft, my boy. I am not fond of spoon victuals. Do you fancy that I don't know how you played the game? I was rather deep in it, myself, as I told you how to play it. That is all right, Mark, and I only hope that you may have grit enough to carry you through. For my part, I am going to slide out."

"Why so?"

"You won't need me, now that you are among your friends, and I don't like the style of your friends a bit."

"They won't hurt you," protested Hannafin.

"But something else may. There is no tell-

ing what may happen to a man when he gets mixed up with such a gang."

"I wish you would stay, Silas, and I am sorry to see you so set against it."

"I would be afraid of getting into a serious scrape if I staid here, and I have got to be a little careful of myself, for the sake of somebody I know. So I shall get away from here in the morning. I presume that you don't care to have me carry the message which Miss Talcott asked you to send to her mother."

"Well, Silas, I can't say that I am worrying about that dispatch. You know that there's no telegraph office anywhere within reach of here, and perhaps it is not necessary that her mother should know where she is just now."

"You will send the message some time, though?"

"When the cows come home. I wish I had nothing to worry me more than that does."

"Let us go and turn in, then. I want to get a good sleep before I light out."

The two men went away, unconscious of the unseen auditor who had listened to them from above.

What she had heard had overwhelmed Eva Talcott with consternation.

It had seemed to her that her weight of trouble was as much as she could bear; but these revelations piled on a fresh and heavy load that threatened to break her down.

When Mark Hannafin declared his purpose of making her his wife—of course by foul means, if fair means would not work—he confirmed a suspicion that had lately been growing in her breast, and she set herself resolutely against it, determined that it would be a long day before he should carry that design into execution.

The old saying held good, that "anybody can lead a horse to water, but nobody can make him drink."

When it was charged and substantially admitted that Hannafin had "put her brother out of the way," she was greatly shocked, though she had not been without a suspicion on that score.

But it was reserved for his last statement to crush her—he had not sent the message to her mother, and had no intention of so doing.

Eva crept back to her rude bed, and seated herself there, pressing her hands to her head in a resolute effort to find a way through the mass of fears and apprehensions that crowded upon her.

She found herself in the power of a gang which was too disreputable and dangerous for even such a man as Silas Birch to mix with, and the only person there whom she could call a friend was one whose intentions with regard to herself she knew to be absolutely selfish and cruel.

Her brother was lost, the victim of that man, and she had been unable with her best efforts to inform her agonized mother of her safety.

Truly she was desolate indeed, and her condition was most pitiable; but, though the present was bad enough, the future promised to be worse.

What should she do? What could she do?

She was startled by a light step in the room, and looking up, she saw dimly in the darkness a form approaching her; but it was a woman's form, and she need have no fear of a woman.

A voice came from the form, and, as it was not the voice of "Aunt Eliza," it must be Linda who had come to visit her, and that fact thrilled her with a new hope.

The words of the girl, cold and strange and full of malice, crashed that hope instantly.

"Skeered you, did it? Well, it ain't no wonder that such as me should skeer such as you. I don't know whether I ort to kill you or not."

This was a most ominous and unlooked-for speech, especially from such a source. Was the girl crazy? or what had prompted her to step in there with such a murderous remark?

Slight of build and mild of countenance, she did not seem to be fitted by nature for desperate deeds; yet she was one of the Shropshire family, and bad blood makes a bad breed.

Eva Talcott, to whom these thoughts presented themselves quickly, chose to consider the case one of barbarous insanity, and had sufficient presence of mind to treat it calmly and sensibly.

"Is that you, Linda dear?" she quietly asked. "Why should you want to kill me? I am sure that I have never done you any harm. Come and sit down here with me, and let us talk about it. I am very lonesome, and am so glad you have come."

Linda Shropshire was disarmed by this kindness and calmness. Her evil intentions, if she really had any, melted away. She seated herself on the bed, and Eva was sure that she heard suppressed sobs.

"Tell me all about it," softly entreated the young lady. "What is the matter, my dear? I hope I have not caused you any trouble."

"He said that he was goin' to marry you," sobbed the girl.

Eva's quick thought comprehended the trouble at once. Linda was fond of Mark Hannafin, and had learned his intentions with regard to herself. She hastened to set herself right in that quarter.

"He never shall marry me, Linda, if I can help it, and I believe I can help it. It takes two to make a bargain, you know."

"Don't you really want to marry him, then?" joyfully exclaimed the girl.

"Not a bit of it. I would die first. Tell me all you know about it, my dear, and we will talk the matter over and think of what we had better do."

Linda became quite friendly and confidential.

"He had gone away somewhere," said she, "and I was waitin' and watchin' fur him to come back, as I wanted to see all I could of him. When he come back with that other man, they stopped around at the end of the house and had a talk, and I hid thar and listened to 'em."

"I heard them too," responded Eva. "It was terrible. Did you hear them say that he had killed my brother?"

"I heered su'thin' o' that sort, but couldn't take it in right, I reckon, because I was so worried about other things."

"Do you think I could marry a man who had killed my brother?"

"Well, no, it don't look like you could," candidly admitted Linda. "But melibe you hain't got the say about it. He says that he means to marry you anyhow."

"He shall not marry me, somehow or anyhow."

"But he says he will, and if he does I'll have you to kill."

"It will be a better plan, my dear—better than killing anybody—to help me get away from here and out of his reach. Will you help me do that, Linda?"

"Wish I could. What do you reckon I mought do?"

"Can't you get my clothes for me?"

"Dunno. I kin try."

"I should think it would be easy for you, if you know where they are, to slip down and get them to-night, while your folks must be asleep."

"Yes, I kin git 'em, and I will. I'll go and git 'em right now."

As Linda arose for this purpose, she was startled by a noise outside, and instantly resumed her place on the bed, snatching at Eva's hand.

"Hark!" she whispered. "It's a-comin'! I knew 'twould come!"

CHAPTER XVII.

VICTORY AND RETREAT.

WHAT it was that was coming was at first a mystery to Eva Talcott, though she felt that it must be something fearful, as Linda seemed to dread it so much.

Directly she heard the trampling of horses' feet, and then it became evident that horses had stopped in front of the house.

Then voices were indistinctly heard, and a shot was fired which was heard very distinctly, causing Eva to start and Linda to scream.

The shot was doubtless intended as a hail, but it was not needed in that way, for the Shropshires down stairs, being quite as acute of hearing as Linda, if not a little more so, had also heard the horses, and were instantly on the alert.

To use the expression current in that region, they were wide awake and full of fleas.

"Uncle Enoch" Shropshire, without opening the door, and speaking through a crack in the shutter, answered the hail, and asked the late arrivals what they wanted.

"We want you, dog-on you!" sternly replied the leader of the party outside. "We want the hull durned batch of you!"

"You ain't goin' to git us in any sech way as that. W'ot you want us fur?"

"You know well enough what we want you fur. Come out o' thar, you infernal hoss-thieves, or we'll fetch you out in a way that'll hurt you!"

This warlike talk was plainly heard by the two trembling girls up-stairs, and was equally terrifying to both of them.

"That man calls your father a horse-thief," whispered Eva.

"Yes, that's so," answered Linda. "Dad's a hoss-thief, and Bob's a hoss-thief, and so is Ben, and I reckon maw an me are hoss-thieves too. I've been waitin' and lookin' fur 'em to come along and take us out and hang us. Looks like they mean to do it now."

The only consolation that Eva Talcott could find in this new complication was the thought that she and Linda could not possibly be mistaken for horse-thieves, and that in the general overturning of things she might be freed from the unpleasant environment of Mark Hannafin and the Shropshires.

The last-named tough citizens, however, had something to do as well as something to say in the matter, and they proceeded to get in their work in a style which showed that this precise contingency had been contemplated and calculated on.

When Eva Talcott entered the house she had seen a number of barrels, apparently full, standing in the space between the two buildings that served as an open hall; but she naturally did

not imagine the use to which it was intended to put them.

The purpose of their presence there was speedily made plain after the presumed Regulators rode up.

Those wide-awake Shropshires sallied out into the hall, and there, under cover of the darkness, they silently and swiftly moved the barrels so that they formed an excellent barricade at each end, with spaces to fire through if necessary.

Mark Hannafin and Silas Birch, when they heard the intent and meaning of this nocturnal visitation, were deeply disgusted—especially the latter—with the turn their affairs had taken; but their disgust was increased when they were called upon to aid in defense of the den.

"That won't do, Uncle Enoch," replied Mark. "You can't expect us to mix up in this sort of thing."

"You'd better do it, though," rejoined the elder Shropshire. "You're in the same boat that we're in, and thar's only one way to git out o' the scrape. W'ay goes you're gal, unless you turn in and help us."

"We've got nothing to fight with," grumbled Mark.

"Thar's guns right afore your eyes, and they're loaded, too."

Hannafin reluctantly took a rifle and the position that was assigned to him; but Birch stubbornly declared that he would rather die right there than have anything to do with the business.

Having finished their fortification in very short order, the Shropshires were ready for action.

The Regulators, as they would probably have styled themselves, seemed to number eight or ten men, and they appeared to be hitching their horses out of the way, preparatory to beginning work in earnest.

Enoch Shropshire hailed them and warned them off.

"You had better cl'ar out, you durned night-hawks! Thar ain't no hoss-thieves yer, and if you fool around us you'll soon know who is goin' to git hurt."

"Come out o' thar, or we'll fetch you out!" was the fierce reply.

A brief silence ensued, during which the outsiders were supposed to be getting ready for the onset.

"Will you surrender?" their leader demanded.

Enoch Shropshire replied that he would first see them all in a place of exceeding hotness, and the business began.

First there came a shot from the outlying timber, and then a scattering volley, doubtless intended to draw the fire of the besieged, or to determine whether they really meant to resist.

They were not to be bamboozled, however, though they caused it to be plainly understood that they were alive and dangerous.

Under the directions of "Uncle Enoch" they fired a few shots in the direction of the flashes outside, but fired slowly and at their leisure, satisfied that they were not exposing themselves to any danger.

It was already evident to their assailants that they held the advantage in this way, and, after another and closer volley that sent bullets plunging into the barrels, a rush was made from the timber.

The rush was what the Shropshires had been expecting and were prepared for.

It was made toward the front of the house only, the assailants showing no strategy worth speaking of in the attack, and there it was met by a resolute and effective defense.

"Aunt Eliza," who proved herself a good enough man for the emergency, had added herself at the first alarm to the fighting force, and, with the unwilling aid of Mark Hannafin, the Shropshires were quite equal to the work they had to do.

Rifles and pistols blazed from behind the barrels, and sent forth their deadly contents so swiftly and viciously that the rush stopped when it had scarcely got a fair start.

The fight was then practically over, for it was evident that the assailants had suffered too severely to care to renew the contest.

One of them at least had been hit, as they could be seen huddled together, as if carrying off some person who had been killed or wounded, and there was no more firing from their side.

The Shropshires, acting on the principle of building a golden bridge for a flying enemy, considerably let them alone.

Their leader finally hailed the house from a safe distance.

"We'll come back here again, you durned scoundrels, and then we'll clean out this nest and make an end of you!"

No attention was paid to this threat, as it was certain that the threateners were going away, this fact being made evident by the sounds of their retreating horses, and afterward by Ben, who made a scout into the timber and found no trace of them remaining.

"Good riddance to bad rubbish!" exclaimed "Uncle Enoch." "We brushed 'em away easy enough; but I'd a durned sight rather not ha' had it to do."

"The same here," observed Mark. "I would not be mixed up in such a scrape as that again for any money."

"I can't blame you, Mr. Hannafin, as I sorter feel the same way myself. For all I know, those may be good men who came here, and I don't want to hurt 'em or put 'em to any trouble. So I shall fix things so that the difficulty won't occur ag'in."

"What will you do?" inquired Mark.

"Jest light out o' yere, and let these cusses whistle fur us when they come ag'in."

"Where will you go to?"

"I know a good place and a safe place—whar they won't think o' lockin' fur us, and couldn't git us if they should find us."

"Will you take me and the young lady?"

"Sartin if you say so. You stick to me, Mr. Hannafin, and I'll stick to you, and I reckon you'll find out that your Uncle Enoch will do to tie to. Jest leave the hull business to me, my boy, and I'll bring you out all right."

The two girls up-stairs had heard nothing of the conversation below, beyond a confused murmur of voices, as the attack and the firing had frightened them so that they were afraid to stir from their position on the bed.

Shortly they were apprized of the determination of their hosts by the arrival of "Aunt Eliza," who brought up Eva's clothing and the gourd lamp.

"You may put on your things, miss," said she, "and git ready as soon as you want to. You're goin' away from yere."

"I am willing to stay here," answered the young lady. "I have no wish to go away."

"You're goin', though, all the same. Why, Lindy, w'ot on airth air you doin' up yere? Who told you you mought come up yere? You're gittin' to be the sneakin'est crittur I know of, as well as the crariest. Cl'ar on, you durned no 'count fool-headed snip, afore I smash you!"

Linda did not wait to be smashed, but hurried away and almost tumbled down the ladder.

It was more than ever evident that she was not a favorite in her own family.

The old woman followed her daughter, without paying any attention to Eva's protests and remonstrances.

Left to herself, the young lady considered as calmly as she could the question of what she had better do, and came to the conclusion that it would be easier as well as safer to obey orders, as she would be forced to do so if she should venture to refuse.

At all events she was glad to get her clothing, and was willing enough to dress herself, as she would thus be enabled to take advantage of any chance in her favor that might arise.

Her clothes were dry, though they had not felt the touch of an iron, and she was painfully aware of the fact that there was not a bit of style about them; but they were a covering and a sufficient protection from the weather at that time and place.

She felt more like herself when she was attired in her own garments, and did not hesitate to look and listen at what was going on below, while she remained up-stairs and waited for further developments.

Nothing of any special interest reached her ears, and the developments came soon enough.

Mrs. Shropshire called to her after a while, and she descended the ladder and found the family ready to start.

From some mysterious hiding-place near by Bob and Ben had brought several horses—it is probable that in the batch were some of those whose loss had aroused the wrath of the Regulators—and they were saddled and ready for the road.

Two of them that carried side-saddles were intended for Eva Talcott and Mrs. Shropshire, a man's saddle being considered good enough for Linda, and another was loaded with such provisions and "plunder" as the Shropshires chose to take away.

"No horse for me, if you please," observed Silas Birch when his attention was called to the animal that had been provided for him.

"What do you mean, Sile?" demanded Mark Hannafin. "You surely can't expect to go afoot."

"Well, I believe that what traveling I have to do can be done afoot. I am not going your way, you see."

"What way are you going, then?"

"Jest going to try to work my way back to civilization. Without meaning any disrespect to present company, I must say that this style of thing is not at all in my line of business, and I prefer to slide out and get where I belong."

Enoch Shropshire was disturbed by this defection, and he whispered eagerly to Mark.

"Shall we let that feller go? Is it safe?"

"Quite safe, old man. Never mind him. If he will not help us, you may be sure that he will do nothing to hurt us."

"Good-by, Mark, and good luck to you!" was Birch's parting salutation.

"Good-by, Sile, and try to take care of yourself."

As Birch had gone off at his own will and without question, it seemed to Eva that there

might be a chance for her to assert her independence and claim a right to do the same; but when she made the effort she found herself crushed by the Shropshires and cajoled by Mark Hannafin.

The cajoling had no effect upon her, as she did not believe a word the young man said; but it was clear to her that she must go willingly or by force, and therefore she submitted as patiently as she could.

CHAPTER XVIII.

STARTING THE SEARCH.

As Gray Gordon, after leaving Mrs. Hannafin's place, walked toward the hotel where he was to meet Gerald Talcott, he seemed to be rather morose, walking slowly and with his head down, and musing as if he had encountered a problem that bothered him.

There was sadness mixed with his musing, too, and it was evident that the widow's champagne had not had an exhilarating effect upon him.

He found Gerald at the hotel, and the young man was immediately struck by the downcast appearance of his old friend.

"What is the matter, Mr. Gordon?" he hastened to ask. "It cannot be that you have failed to get the money."

"No indeed. I got the money all right, and had not a bit of trouble about it. I wish that everything before us was as easy as that."

"There is something that worries you, I am sure."

"No worry of my own, anyhow. There may be a little of other people's worry that has caught onto me like burrs when you go through the bushes. There are many queer things in this world, Gerald, and it is unaccountable how they turn up when they are least expected."

"What have you been running foul of now?"

"I have heard a strange story which I may tell you some time, and one item which I have picked up may be somewhat surprising to you. Who do you think that old moonshiner is, who helped the flatboatmen rob us?"

"I think I know *what* he is, and that is enough for me."

"I believe that he is the father of Mark Hannafin, the man who dumped you into the Mississippi."

"The dence he is! Well, I shouldn't wonder. They must be a bad crowd all around."

"Not so very bad, perhaps. The old moonshiner, who is probably not near as old as he seems to be, is not, in my opinion, entirely right in his mind."

"He was smart enough to strip us of our property. But his name is Rapp, Mr. Gordon. Colonel Rapp is what they call him over there."

"Yes, that is one of the peculiarities of the case. As I understand it, an injury to his head has caused him to forget his former life, including his family and his name. But we are not likely to run across the man again, Gerald, and we need not worry about him. I hope you were not lonesome while I was away, my boy."

"Lonesome? Not I. I have been too busy to be lonesome."

"What have you been doing?"

"The first thing I did was to send my mother another dispatch, telling her that I have reason to hope that Eva is alive. Then, feeling sure that you would get the money you went after, I attended to the business of securing transportation for us to the wreck of the Rowena."

"That was thoughtful. How did you succeed?"

"I found a little stern-wheel boat that runs up a small stream somewhere below here, and the captain agreed to start ahead of his time, as early in the morning as possible, and to land us at the spot we wish to reach."

"That was well done, Gerald."

"Of course I promised to pay him well, relying on you to back up my bargain. It is a strange thing, Mr. Gordon, that I find myself so willing to accept money from you, leaving you to pay the expenses of this business. Of course I expect to settle the pecuniary obligation; but it is not that which makes me feel easy. I suppose it must be the way you have about you that causes this sort of thing to seem natural to me."

"I am glad, then, that I have that way, as I want you to trust me and rely upon me."

"Yet it is strange," insisted Gerald, "that I should so easily give myself up to the guidance of a comparative stranger."

"I don't consider myself even a comparative stranger to you now. You must remember that we have got acquainted very rapidly since we met on the Rowena. Circumstances sometimes throw people together in such a shape that they gain more knowledge of each other in a little while than years of common acquaintance would give them. But that is all right, Gerald—the more the better, and the rest of it. Your credit is good with me, and, as a matter of fact, it is. Mrs. Hannafin who is paying our expenses this trip. Since you have been attending to business so well, there is only one thing left that we need to do."

"What is that, sir?"

"I fancy that we will need some help, and,

as it is getting late, I must start at once to find and engage a couple of men."

"But why will we need them?"

"Well, Gerald, there is no telling what may turn up, and it is well to be prepared. Of course, though we don't like to talk about it, we are both suspicious of Mark Hannafin, and it is possible that we may have to do a good deal of searching. I am afraid that the young man means mischief, because it seems to me that he might, if he had tried, have brought your sister away on the steamboat that went to the rescue of the Rowena, that is, supposing it to be true that he and she were the parties seen on the sand-bar."

"I have thought so, too," added Gerald.

"If he does mean mischief, he has gone ashore there for a purpose, and we may have trouble to find him and more trouble after we find him. It is best to be prepared as well as we can for any difficulties that may arise."

"You are right, Mr. Gordon, as you always are. But where will we find the men?"

In a city like Memphis it was of course easy to hire men for such a service; but the trouble with most of them was that they were either loafers or otherwise unfitted for the purpose, and Gordon was obliged to admit that he did not know where to lay his hands on the right sort.

It was his idea, however, that he could fall back on Hank Byers, whose information and advice had already proved to be so interesting and serviceable, and he and Gerald sallied forth in search of Hank.

They found him without much difficulty, and Gordon explained to him what was wanted, without going into details concerning the object of the employment or the use to which the men might possibly be put.

"I think I know what you mean," said Byers.

"You suppose that you are going to find a rough style of Americans over there, and it is quite likely that you may."

"We have already had some experience in that line," observed Gordon, "and that is how I happened to be short of money."

"I see. A burnt child dreads the fire. Come with me, then, and in a little while I will find a couple of tough citizens who will suit you."

"Not too tough," suggested Gordon, "but just tough enough, as they are to be our companions."

"Just so. Come along and be your pick."

Hank Byers, who was thoroughly acquainted with the city, led the way to a saloon—of course to a saloon, as the rooms of the Y. M. C. A. did not contain the article required—where he had only to look about him to find men who were both willing and eager to risk their lives if necessary for the sake of adventure and a few dollars.

Gordon, who considered himself a good judge of human nature, speedily chose from those who were offered to him a couple of men who, as he believed, would suit his purpose, and made a bargain with them.

One of them was Jerry Mabry, an Arkansan who happened to be stranded in Memphis, and who was evidently well acquainted with the western side of the river.

The other was Ernst Kreutz, a German who announced himself as a member of a "Turn Verein" and a "Schuetzen Corps," and as the possessor of a "yager" that was unequalled for accurate shooting.

Both of these men, being entirely unattached, were ready to start at once, and Gordon took them away with him, after thanking Hank Byers for his valuable services.

"That makes something more that I owe you, Mr. Byers," said he, "and I hope to be able to settle up with you before long."

"You have already paid me right well," answered Byers. "I made a decent little pile by taking your advice and following your lead to-night."

"And you might have made more if you had caught on sooner. But that did not pay anything of what I owed you. We are both greatly obliged to you, Hank Byers, and that must pass for partial payment."

It was not necessary for Gordon to stop at the hotel and pay the bills of himself and his friend, as they had no baggage, and had been politely requested to pay in advance for what they had got.

So he and Gerald, with their two allies, went down to the levee and boarded the little stern-wheel craft, and settled themselves to sleep for the remainder of the night.

The captain of the "fly-up-the-creek," which was known as the Chicot, had no idea of carrying out to the letter the bargain that he had made with Gerald Talcott, and might have remained at the Memphis levee all day, but Gray Gordon, who was up and out at daybreak, roused him from his berth, and had a serious conversation with him.

As a result of that discussion, with which the current money of the United States was not at all concerned, the Chicot got up at an early hour in the morning, and left the landing at the dawn of day.

It was understood on the little boat that the party of four were going to search for a lady

who had been a passenger on the ill-fated Rowena, and they were duly sympathized with by the captain and crew.

On the passage Gerald had an idea which he communicated to his old friend as they sat on the hurricane deck, looking down the river.

"There is one thing that we forgot to attend to, Mr. Gordon," said he.

"What is that, Gerald?"

"If we are likely to have something of a search, as you think may be the case, and if the country is as unsettled as we found it when we swam ashore, we ought to have some provisions in a shape that we can use."

"That is already attended to, my boy. I have made arrangements with the cook of this craft, and also, I may add, with the barkeeper, and we will have plenty of provisions, solid and liquid."

"In due course of time—that is to say, shortly after noon—the little Chicot rounded to on the western shore of the river, a short distance below the remains of the Rowena.

She was obliged to feel her way carefully through the water at the lower end of the sand-bar, but being of very light draught and accustomed to working over shoals, she reached the bank, and landed there the searching party and their belongings.

The landing of a steamboat there—even so small a craft as the Chicot—was quite an event, as was proved by the arrival at the bank, of a man of decidedly backwoods appearance, with a boy and girl of the same stripe, who stood and stared at the little steamboat and the strangers.

To these natives, as soon as the Chicot had left the shore, Gordon applied for information, saying that he and his friends were looking for three people, who were supposed to have escaped from the burning Rowena and to have come ashore from the sand-bar.

"The man was most depressingly ignorant, as well as stupid, but was quite willing to state fully all that he did not know."

"I was off in the woods," he said, "a-dockin' fur a stray heifer when that steamboat burnt; but Tom and Myrry was yer, and I reckon they seed' wot was to be seed'."

"Tom and Myrry," who seemed to be too obtuse to have ever taken hold of any facts and kept them in their recollection, came out finely on this occasion.

"We was standin' yer a-watchin' the steamboat burn," said Tom, "along with old man Shropshire and Bob and Ben. Thar was a woman and two men on the bar, and Bob Shropshire he got a skiff down into the water, and rowed over thar and fetched 'em ashore. They was orful wet, and arter a while they went off with the Shropshire folks."

An attempt to get a description of the rescued parties did not elicit much matter of interest from Tom; but Myrry, being a girl, was able to give a fair idea of the young lady's clothes, and from this Gerald Talcott decided that she was his sister.

"Where did they go to?" inquired Gordon.

"To Enoch Shropshire's place, I reckon. They all went together, and they started off that way."

The promise of pay induced Tom to guide the searching party to Enoch Shropshire's place, though he declared that he would not accompany them to the house, but would take them within sight of it and leave them there.

Myra and her father were gratified with some of the coin of the republic, and Gordon and Tom led the way into the woods.

CHAPTER XIX.

RUDELY AROUSED.

THE boy's reluctance to go to the Shropshire place necessarily excited the curiosity of Gordon and his friends, who plied him with questions, endeavoring to extract from him some information concerning the Shropshires; but it was little enough that they could get out of Tom.

Whatever other qualities he might lack, he knew how to hold his tongue, and guarded his speech as carefully as if he had been instructed in the art.

"You must be afraid of Enoch Shropshire and his folks," observed Gordon.

"I reckon I ain't."

"What is the matter, then? Why won't you tell us anything about them? Are they a bad crowd?"

"I dunno. I've heard talk goin' around, but I don't take much notice o' talk."

As nothing more was to be got out of the boy, the party were obliged to be satisfied with his guidance to the Shropshire house, which he pointed out to them when they came within sight of it, and hurried away as soon as he received the pay that had been promised him.

His reluctance and reticence had of course aroused strong suspicion in the minds of the party, and they approached the Shropshire residence with the feeling that they must be on their guard against some danger which they could not estimate or understand.

"I am afraid, Gerald," said Gordon, "that young Hannafin means mischief, and that he

is trying to get your sister away from her friends, instead of taking her to them. From what we have heard so far, he seems to have been on good terms with those Shropshires, and there can hardly be a doubt that they are a bad crowd."

"So it is a good thing," answered Gerald, "that we came prepared for trouble."

"I only hope that we may be sufficiently prepared. We must be on our guard at every step, and it will be best to approach this place a little cautiously."

They did approach it cautiously, and Jerry Mabry, whose lungs were of leather, hailed the house from a safe distance; but there was no response to the hail.

As it was then near the close of day, it was deemed necessary to push proceedings.

Again and again the house was hailed, and still there was no answer, and no sign of life was visible about the place.

"I reckon thar ain't nobody in thar," remarked Jerry Mabry. "I'll go and see."

The entire party moved cautiously toward the house, the Arkansan in the lead, and it soon became evident that the establishment was deserted, and the question then was, what had become of the occupants?

Though the empty rooms were scantily furnished, there were evidences of recent occupation, but a thorough search failed to develop any signs from which the presence there of Eva Talcott or Mark Hannafin might be conjectured.

"Perhaps this is not the place they came to," suggested Gerald, when he and his employer had descended from the loft to the open hall.

"I have no doubt that they came here," answered Gordon; "but why they should have left here—that is, why the entire party should have cleared out—passes my comprehension."

"Some people, whom we must suppose to be the Shropshire family, had surely been living here," said Gerald.

"Yes, and what has become of them? If they had remained, we might presume, and it would be easy to ascertain the fact, that young Hannafin and his partner had taken your sister to some point from which she could easily reach her friends or communicate with them. But they have all gone away together, and it is hard to guess what that means."

Ernst Kreutz, who had been making a search of the establishment on his own account, called the attention of the others to a number of barrels that were scattered carelessly about in the open hall, nearly blocking up the passage at each end.

An examination showed that the barrels were filled with earth, and this was deemed a suspicious circumstance, especially as a closer inspection disclosed holes in the barrels which were decided to have been made by bullets.

"There has been a fight here," said Jerry Mabry.

"No doubt of that," declared Gordon, "and I wish we knew who had been fighting, what the fight was about, and what the result of it was. These barrels filled with earth can have been prepared and placed here only for one purpose. They must have been intended for use as a fortification, and that proves that the people who lived here must have had enemies, lawful or otherwise, against whom they were obliged to fortify the place. As a result of the fight the house is deserted; but whether the occupants have been captured, or have merely decamped, is the mystery of the matter, and there don't seem to be anybody in the neighborhood who is able or willing to solve that mystery."

"Then we must go to work and solve it for ourselves," suggested Gerald. "Our friend, Mabry, who knows the country and the ways of the people here, will be able to put us on the track, and we ought to push forward and follow them up as fast as we can."

"We can do nothing to-night," answered Gordon. "Even if Jerry should be able to pick out the right trail in the darkness, we could not attempt to follow it before daylight."

This opinion was confirmed by the Arkansan, and it was settled that the party should pass the night at the Shropshire house, and make as early a start as possible the next morning.

So they had their supper, using the provisions which they had brought from the Chicot, bunked down as comfortably as they could, and waited for the morning.

It must have been about midnight when they were aroused by a shot outside, followed by a hail, and speedily they were up and ready for business, taking hold of the new emergency as well as they might.

"Hello, there!" shouted Gray Gordon, jumping up and answering the hail as soon as he could. "What's the matter?"

"You know what's the matter. Come out o' thar, you durned boss-thieves! You can't worry us ag'in as you did last night."

"There are no horse-thieves here!" he yelled in reply; but a volley of rifle bullets admonished him to take in his head and keep it within cover.

"What do you mean?" he cried. "Let us know what the trouble is, and we will straighten it up."

"You can't fool us ag'in as you did last night. We've got you surrounded this time, and we

mean business from the word go. Come out o' thar and surrender, or we'll turn loose and clean out the hull den."

Gordon consulted hastily with his friends.

"Those men out there mean business," said he "and our best chance is to give in and try to convince them that they have got hold of the wrong crowd."

"Hello!" he shouted then. "What do you want us to do?"

"Jest come out o' thar and give yourselves up."

"That is what we want to do, and glad of the chance. But you have made a mistake, my friends. We are not the men you are looking for."

"Come out and show yourselves, then, and we will settle that durned sudden."

"All right, but we want to be sure that no more mistakes will be made. Start a fire out there, so that you can have a light to see us by."

This was a reasonable request, but there was a little delay before it was answered, as the leader seemed to be consulting with his followers and giving orders.

Shortly he hailed the house again.

"Hello, there! We'll start a fire. But you'd better come straight out and not try any gum games. We're fixed for you to-night, and you'd better not play roots on us."

Gordon again assured them of the good intentions of himself and his friends, and a bright fire was started in the clear space between the timber and the house.

Leaving their weapons in the house—with the exception of their revolvers, which were retained for a possible emergency—the four men sallied forth and approached the fire.

They were met by a strong force of men, all well armed and with their rifles ready for immediate business; but their attitude changed when they perceived the weaponless and peaceful style of the four men who came from the house.

Gray Gordon, as usual, was the spokesman of the four, and he stepped forward briskly and boldly.

"I hope that you will have the kindness to tell me what this means," said he. "We are strangers here, and we feel sure that some mistake has been made. I may say, too, that we are glad to meet you and have a chance to explain matters."

The men about the fire surrounded the men from the house, and scrutinized them closely as they came forward, but seemed to be disappointed, if not disgusted, by what they found.

"These folks ain't no Shropshires," observed one of them.

"That's so," responded the leader, who gave his name as Abe Lassiter. "Who are you, men, and how did you git here?"

"That is the very thing," declared Gordon, "which we want to explain. I suppose we are looking for the same men whom you are hunting."

He proceeded to relate the business that had brought himself and his friends there, and told how, having found the Shropshire house deserted, they had decided to remain there until morning, when they expected to begin a search for the missing occupants.

The meeting was adjourned to the house, where Gordon's statements as far as concerned that establishment, were fully confirmed.

Abe Lassiter expressed it as his opinion that the strangers were "all right," and went on to make a statement concerning the Shropshires which was decidedly uncomplimentary to that family.

"They're the worst set of boss-thieves," said he, "that we have struck in these parts for a long time; but it is only lately that we have found 'em out and lit down on 'em. We made up a party yesterday, and came here last night to give the cusses what they deserved; but they were ready for us, and they fought us off, hurting one of our men right badly. These barrels of dirt tell the story."

"We had noticed the barrels," said Gordon, "and had come to the conclusion that there had been some such a fight as you speak of. We supposed that they had quit the house after the fight, and that the best thing we could do would be to stay here until morning and try to get on their trail."

"Well, Mr. Gordon, it's a fact that you came durned nigh getting the dose that we had fixed up for the boss-thieves. We got some more men, and came here to-night to clean 'em out, you see, and if you hadn't stepped forward just as you did, you'd ha' caught it hot and heavy, because we wasn't in the humor to stand any sort o' nonsense."

"If you are satisfied that we are all right," observed Gerald Talcott, "and as we all are hunting the same people, I hope that we may ask you to help us to do what we came here to do."

"That's the point," broke in Gordon, "and that is why I told you that we were so glad to meet you. The young lady that I told you of is this young man's sister, and you know that we can't bear to have her in such a crowd as that. Help us to follow them up and get her away

from them, and if money is any object to you—"

"Drop that!" exclaimed Lassiter. "What do you take us for, anyhow? If we can do anything to help a lady that's in trouble, you may bet your solid life that we don't want any money for it. Then, again, as you say, we are hunting the same crowd. So let's hunt together."

"That suits us exactly, and we want to make the hunt as short and sharp as possible."

"You will find us with you there, Mr. Gordon; but you had hit it off right on one point. We can't do anything afore morning, and we must just try to be content and wait till then."

CHAPTER XX.

SEEKING CLEWS.

THE Shropshire house was full of lodgers during the remainder of the night; but they had not much time for sleep, as at daybreak everybody was astir and out, anxious to begin the search for the absconding Shropshires and their willing and unwilling companions.

While the men from across the river were eager to find and rescue the lost young lady, the Arkansans wanted to hurry up and punish the horse-thieves who had given them such a hard time, adding insult to injury by sneaking away after driving off and seriously damaging their assailants.

While Gray Gordon went with the Arkansans to look for the trail, Gerald Talcott remained in the house to seek by the daylight for some sign of his sister's presence there.

The others were scattered about in various errands and occupations, quite a delegation attending to the preparation of breakfast for the combined party.

Gerald's search came to nothing, as he could not discover anywhere about the house any scrap or sign to prove to him that Eva had been there, and he soon went out to join those who were picking up the trail.

Their search had been easily made successful, as it was no trouble to find and to follow the plain traces left by the fugitive Shropshires, and the Arkansans were then busy in guessing whither the trail led and where it would end.

Though at first this was mere matter of guesswork, points were gradually picked up that aided conjecture and brought the party nearer to definite conclusions.

"It is sart'in that the rascals are the boss-thieves we've been huntin'," said one of the Arkansans. "I've found the tracks of my ran mar," which I know 'em well because a shoe was missin' from the nigh hind foot."

"Thar's no doubt of that, Dentry," answered long Abe Lassiter, "and thar's no doubt that we can pick up that trail and foller it as long as it sticks to dry land. But we can't afford to foller it all over these United States, and they've got a good start, and I'd be glad to have some sort of a notion about whar they're likely to bring up."

Upon this question the combined intellect and experience of the Arkansans were concentrated, with the more or less valuable assistance of Jerry Mabry.

It was to them an important question, as they would be loth to leave their farms and families for an indefinite time, even to devote themselves to the praiseworthy pursuit of hunting horse-thieves, and they were naturally anxious to know whither the pursuit would be likely to lead them.

Point after point was gradually picked up, as has been said, and, by patching together bits of information concerning the haunts and habits of the Shropshires, with the direction of their trail, the nature of the country into which it led, and some other little personal or public details, one general conclusion was finally reached and agreed to.

"They've gone due north," was the way Abe Lassiter put it. "They know just whar they are going to, and they won't stop afore they've crossed the Missouri line."

Not that the crossing of the Missouri line amounted to anything to the Regulators there present, as Judge Lynch, when he really means to get his work in, never bothers himself about requisitions or State lines, finding a "jury of the vicinage" always ready to execute his decree if he can prove his case.

But the impression prevailed that the Shropshires had friends over the border, with probably a haunt of their own, and that they had gone thither because they believed that they would be safe in that quarter.

This view of the case naturally made the Arkansans feel a little dubious, as they were not anxious to be again pushed into a fight against any sort of odds or advantages.

The sacred duty of catching horse-thieves, however, was not to be shirked, if its execution was within the limit of reasonable possibility, and the men of Arkansas were so far from being disposed to shirk it, that they were only anxious to get a clear idea of what they would have to do.

Having justice on their side, if lacking the law, they had a right to demand that the odds of a fight should be also on their side.

The questions then were, who were the Shrop-

shires' supposed friends up yonder, and where was their supposed haunt?

"I reckon I can settle both of them pints," observed Jerry Mabry, who had lately been listening to the statements and opinions of the others without putting in a word of his own.

"If you can do that, Jerry," eagerly declared Gordon, "you are the right man in the right place. So jump right in and settle them."

"Well, gentlemen all," began Jerry, with a certain slowness and hesitation, evidently not caused by modesty, "I must say that I've had cause to know somethin' about hoss-stealin' in these parts, along with some other little matters that may be more or less in that line. I don't mean to say that I ever stole a hoss—"

"Oh, no! no! no!" was the general chorus that interrupted the speaker.

"Of course you never stole a horse, Jerry," chimed in Gray Gordon. "If you ever had stolen a horse, nobody here would care a straw about it now. All we want to know about you is whether you can show us how to lay our hands on some men who are known to have been stealing horses. If you will do that, you shall be counted as good as gold and as pure as an angel."

"You are giving it to him right, colonel," observed Abe Lassiter, "and we'll all stick up to that talk."

"Well, gentlemen all," began Jerry again, "bein's we ain't here to do any argufyin' about outside pints that ain't strictly business, I must say that thar's one place in these parts whar a hoss that's been slipped up onto is mighty apt to bring up, either by way of a friendly call, or to stop awhile. That place is just over the border, and the man who runs it is an old moonshiner who goes by the name of Colonel Rapp."

Gray Gordon and Gerald Talcott started and stared at each other, but said nothing at the moment, and their agitation was not observed by the others.

To Gordon it must have seemed strange that this Colonel Rapp, or whatever his name might be, was continually cropping up, and that all roads appeared to lead to him.

"I've heard of that man," observed Abe Lassiter, "and I reckon we all know more or less about him. It is a great pity that he should mix up hoss-stealin' with honest business."

It may be proper to state the fact that the manufacture of surreptitious and untaxed whisky, commonly styled moonshining, although not regarded as an honest business by the Government, was held in good repute by most of the people in the neighborhoods where it was carried on, and the moonshiners were looked up to as heroes and public benefactors.

Horse-stealing, however, offended not the statute law alone, but the universal law, and was utterly abominable by the general consent of mankind.

To join the functions of moonshining and horse-stealing was scarcely less than sacrilege in Arkansas.

Jerry Mabry protested rather feebly in favor of Colonel Rapp.

"It don't seem to be scarcely right to go as far as that, Mr. Lassiter. He don't mix up hoss-stealin' with business; leastwise, he don't steal no hosses as I ever heard of."

"A sort of receiver of stolen horses," suggested Gordon.

"Maybe somethin' in that line. The hosses do bring up thar, as I said afore."

"This is the pint, then, Mr. Mabry," remarked Lassiter. "If hoss-stealin' is mixed up with the business, they've got a den up thar that's likely to be a tough one to tackle. Do you know enough of that den to put us onto it and give us a fair show at the gang?"

"Seems as if I ought to. I know the ins and outs of it right well."

"I know something about it, too," observed Gray Gordon, and this quiet remark drew upon him the general gaze, accompanied by a running fire of ejaculations of astonishment.

"Yes, gentlemen, I have been there," he responded—"I and my young friend Talcott—and my little experience cost me something. I was robbed there of quite a pile of money. Not that I blame Colonel Rapp for that affair, so much as I blame certain parties who appeared to be particular friends of his, and it was they who got the money."

"We are getting on now purty fast," remarked Lassiter, "and I don't see anything to hinder us from finding those rascals and striking them."

"Then let us start right out and strike them," urged Gordon.

"All right, colonel; but we can't go too fast. Grub's the first thing to be tended to, and for you folks there's something more to be done."

"What is that?"

"You will have to get hosses. This is no sort of tramping job, Mr. Gordon, and you can't think of trying to make the trip without critters."

No doubt this was true; but the contingency was one upon which Gordon had not counted, and the statement of the fact quite upset him.

"I suppose you are right, Mr. Lassiter," he sadly answered; "but how on earth are we going to get horses?"

"That is just what I am going to look after right away," replied Lassiter, as he started up and entered into a hasty consultation with some of his companions.

The consultation was not ended when the party were informed that their breakfast was ready, and just then a couple of stragglers who had been down to the river arrived with an interesting announcement.

CHAPTER XXI.

NIGHT BACKED BY MIGHT.

THE news that was brought up from the river was not only interesting to the Arkansans, but was regarded by them as a matter of actual importance.

It was to the effect that a flatboat of the "storeboat" variety had lately landed down there, and that the "goods" to be disposed of by the mercantile craft were whisky in all sorts of packages.

Though a general whisky famine was scarcely possible in an Arkansas district, yet in isolated communities, owing to sparseness of settlement and difficulty of communication, the supply was sometimes known to run low or even to give out entirely, and such occasions were regarded as public calamities.

One of them had struck the region from which Abe Lassiter and his levies had come, and they had consequently been obliged to leave their homes with an insufficient supply of the fluid which most of them regarded as one of the necessities of life.

To this destitution had been partially due the hesitation about proceeding further with the expedition.

The arrival of a storeboat loaded with whisky, however, instantly put a new face on the affair, arousing fresh enthusiasm, and inspiring them with renewed confidence.

All they then had to do was to go down to the river and secure such a supply of solace and invigoration as would carry them whooping through the campaign.

The news gave them excellent appetites, and they hastened to demolish the breakfast that had been prepared for them.

To Gray Gordon the news was also good news, not only on account of its effect upon his allies, but because he instantly jumped to a conclusion which was soon proved to be correct.

A little questioning convinced him that he knew the flatboat which had arrived, and that its owners were the Gonders who had victimized him.

As a further delay was rendered inevitable by the necessity of procuring horses, he proposed to himself that he should take advantage of the opportunity and get even with the rascals who had robbed him.

While his companions ate voraciously, he gave them an outline of the robbery, without going too far into previous details, and declared that the two Gonders on the whisky-boat were the men who had got his money, to say nothing of the shameful treatment he had received at their hands.

"All I want," said he, "is a chance to get even with those sneaking scoundrels. I don't want any help, and I will promise not to interfere with any business you may have with them, as I don't expect to get my work in until that is over. Give me a chance, and let me alone—that's all."

The Arkansans easily admitted that this was a reasonable request, and that he ought to have his chance.

"Just one thing more," he added. "When we are down there at the flatboat, you must none of you speak to me or even mention my name, as I don't want those scalawags to know me until I am ready to spring myself on them."

"Seems to me that they will be apt to know you, colonel, without any help from us," suggested Abe Lassiter.

"Indeed they won't. Let me run my own end of the show, and I will guarantee that."

Gordon went up-stairs in the house, and from his clothing brought out a few "fakements" which he had procured in Memphis.

They were simple but effective.

With a reddish wig and a beard of the same hue, well fitted and deftly applied, his appearance was so completely transformed that his companions did not recognize him when he returned to them.

"You'll do, Mr. Gordon," remarked Lassiter. "I reckon you can be trusted to play your own game, and now all who want to may go down to the river and liquor up."

"Not you, Gerald," ordered Gordon. "Those Gonders would spot you at once, and you will have to stay here out of the way."

Talcott promised to do so; but he spoke quietly to Mabry and the German, requesting them to watch his friend and be ready to back him if he should need backing.

With the exception of Abe Lassiter and Gerald Talcott and two others, the entire party hastened down to the river to sample the Gonder whisky.

When they came in sight of the flatboat it needed but a glance to assure Gray Gordon of

the identity of the craft, and further proof was furnished by the presence of the Gonders, father and mother and son, all looking just as mean and malignant and "or'nary" and sneaking as when he last saw them.

They were overjoyed by the early arrival of a delegation of citizens—especially such a large and thirsty delegation as this proved to be, and business began with them so briskly that they were justified in anticipating a large income.

The Arkansans, hastening to sample the liquor that was offered them, were rejoiced at discovering that it was neither Cincinnati red-eye nor Louisville blue-ruin—noxious compounds shipped in vast quantities for the purpose of emptying the southern pocket and destroying the southern stomach—but genuine moonshine from a secret and home-bred still, unquestionably the pure juice of the corn, and not much the worse for its rawness.

The business of filling flasks proceeded rapidly, Israel and his mother working with a will, while the old man made change and watched the proceedings with avaricious eyes.

This was an unexpected big bonanza for him, and he blessed the impulse that had led him to run his craft in there near the wreck of the Rowena.

When the rush of business began to slacken, his attention was claimed by Gray Gordon, who had been sampling the liquor with the rest, apparently devoting himself to it with a vigor that promised speedy intoxication.

Gordon surely looked like a wild man from the mountains, and it was evident to him that none of the Gonders had suspected his identity.

"Look-a-here, old man," he said, catching the elder Israel by the shirt-sleeve, "don't none o' you folks never play no sort o' games with kecards?"

"Mebbe we do, a leetle, sometimes," admitted Israel.

"That's what I'm huntin', old pard. I've got whole boodles of money, and am just achin' to find some man who thinks he can beat me out of it."

"Well, I dunno 'bout that. I don't purtend to be much on kecards; but now and then I like to play a bit of seven-up."

"Seven-up ain't my stronghold, old man," observed Gordon. "Poker's what takes me whar I live every time. But I've got money as says that I'm hard to beat at seven-up, all the same."

This was just what old Israel Gonder wanted.

He considered himself an adept at his favorite game of seven-up, or all-fours, or old sledge, or whatever anybody chose to style it, and a considerable portion of his profits along the shores of the Mississippi was secured by his skill in fleecing the natives at that game.

He had ocular demonstration of the fact that the red-headed Arkansen was well supplied with money, and his appearance and manner indicated an easy victim.

Why, then, should not Mr. Israel Gonder take this wild man of the woods into camp and despoil him of his property?

This was just what Mr. Israel Gonder proposed to do.

He produced a greasy deck of cards at first, but brought out a new pack at Gordon's request, and the two antagonists seated themselves at a table near the door.

A detailed description of the game as it was begun and continued might possibly be instructive; but it would be much too lengthy, and at the same time the most careful description of the game could not possibly include its intricacies and its true inwardness.

Therefore only a general idea of its style and results can be given.

In his native township, and among the people along the bank of the rivers whom he supplied with whisky, old Israel Gonder may have been a success at seven-up; but he had surely never played the game on the Pacific Coast, where everything of the kind found its highest development and was worked for all it was worth.

Gray Gordon had been there, and the style in which he proved himself a master of the game was enough to make old Israel's hair stand on end.

The trumps, the court cards, the ten-spots and the jacks were always just where he wanted them, and no matter how good a hand his opponent might hold, he never failed to have one that could just beat it.

It did not take long to satisfy the old man as well as to astonish him, and when he had got enough he threw down his cards and declared his intention of quitting.

He had not lost much, though a good deal more than he had wanted to lose, and the prospect of Gordon's getting his money back by winning it from the old flatboatman appeared to be too faint to be worth considering.

That, however, was not Gordon's idea.

He had no time to spare for such a campaign as that and the cards were merely an introduction to his real intention.

By this time the game had become the center of attraction to all inside of the flatboat; and among those who had gathered near the table to watch it were young Israel and his mother, the former staring at the style in which the old man

was "wound up," and the latter obviously pleased when her husband decided to drop out.

"So you are going to quit, are you?" sneered Gordon.

"Yes, I'm going to quit."

"Got enough, have you?"

"Yes, I've got enough."

"But I am not going to quit, as I have not got enough. I have just begun, and I have not got what I came here for yet."

"I don't see how you're goin' to git anythin' more out o' me."

"But you will see, if you open your eyes."

Old Israel opened his eyes wide when a cocked revolver was leveled at him, and the next instant Gordon astonished him still more by quickly removing his hat and red wig and beard.

"You know me now?" he sharply demanded. "Of course you do. I am one of the men you robbed the other day, and my friend is not far from here. Do you know what I have come here for, now? Do you see how I mean to get it?"

The means were entirely too visible to old Israel, who was overwhelmed with consternation; but there were two of his tribe behind him, and young Israel and his mother looked as if they meditated mischief.

Gray Gordon and his revolver were enough for the entire tribe, as by a slight turn of the wrist he could cover either of them. "Look out, there!" he ordered. "If you stir a finger, old man, or if your cub or that old cat stirs, except just as I give the order, it's sure and sudden death. It is as much as I can do, anyhow, to keep from salting you all down as you sit there, and you had better not aggr me."

"What do you want us to do?" whined old Israel.

"I want you to hand over the money that you took from me and my friend, and to be quick about it."

The flatboatman was seized by the idea of making an appeal to the crowd.

"Are you goin' to stand this, gentlemen?" he inquired, as if they were collectively being imposed upon. "Here's a man who means to rob me, and I want to know if you're goin' to stand thar and see it done. Ain't thar no sort o' law about yer?"

"Thar's just this sort of law, stranger," answered Jerry Mabry. "The man has told us that you robbed him, and we allow that he spoke the truth. We don't mean to kender him in collectin' what's his due."

There was nothing to be got in that quarter, and no hope of assistance from young Israel or the old woman.

"How much is it?" grunted old Israel.

Gordon named a sum.

"Twarn't so much as that."

"That don't miss it much. It's near enough."

"I didn't git the half of it. Colonel Rapp, he got the most."

"Don't lie, Israel. There is nothing so misbecoming to a man of your years as a lie. Colonel Rapp may be bad enough in his way; but you are the cuss that hived my cash, and it is you who must restore it to me. If you don't happen to have that amount of money in your pocket, tell your cub or the old woman to get it and count it out here on the table. And you had better do it pretty darned quick, as I am getting nervous, and this gun might go off."

There seemed to be no way out of the scrape, and the old flatboatman submitted, directing his son to get the money.

Young Israel doubtless considered this as his opportunity, to judge by the eagerness with which he got away from the eye of Gray Gordon; but there was more than one eye to watch him.

He hastened behind the counter to the money drawer—not to get the money, but to get a revolver that was concealed there.

Hardly had he touched that much-desired weapon, when he heard a guttural whisper, and, looking up, he saw Ernst Kreutz bending over him with something wicked in his hand.

The German ordered him in plain enough English to drop that gun, and he did drop it, taking a roll of bills in its stead.

He slouched back to the table, and gave the roll of bills to his father, who slowly and gloomily counted out to Gordon the sum demanded.

Young Israel and his mother watched the operation with looks which, if looks could avail, would have annihilated the man who had enforced the restitution of the stolen funds.

Gordon pocketed the bills, and arose, but was in no hurry to pocket his revolver.

"That is all," said he. "It is not all that ought to be done; but I have got my money back, and I am satisfied. Now, you miserable, sneaking, scoundrelly scallawags, I advise you to get out of the business of robbing strangers, or you may not come off as easy as you have this time. You had better get away from here pretty suddenly, too, as I might happen to come back, and if I should come back and find you here, this concern of yours would be where the boy was after he had left the burning deck."

He backed out at the open door of the flatboat, gradually followed by those who had come with him, and leaving the Gordon family filled with sorrow, if not with remorse.

CHAPTER XXII.

INTO THE WILDERNESS.

To use a coarse but quite apposite expression, the moonlight flitting from the Shropshire house was very "rough on" poor Eva Talcott.

Not that she objected to leaving that place, but the cause and manner of the leaving were highly objectionable.

She did not know whither or for what purpose she was being taken away, and it naturally seemed to her that every step was carrying her further away from the possibility of meeting her friends or communicating with them.

One link that connected her with her life before the destruction of the Rowena had been broken by the abrupt departure of Silas Birch.

It was true that she was unable to regard him as a friend, though he had assisted in saving her life; yet he was in every respect far preferable to the Shropshires, and when he was gone she could not help feeling that she had lost something.

There was just a little bit of consolation in the fact that she had gained a friend, though such a weak and sad-colored friend as poor Linda Shropshire would hardly seem to be worth counting.

Yet sympathy always has its value, and sufferers always know how to appreciate it. Though not a tonic, it serves as a soothing mixture.

Another serious difficulty was found in her physical condition.

Grief at the loss of her brother, the perils of the burning steamer, the exhausting struggle for life, the painful tramp through the woods, and an insufficiency of food and rest, combined with present and continuing anxieties to shatter this delicately-raised young lady, who had never been accustomed to any hardships.

Yet she could not suffer herself to be shattered, as she would thereby lose her last hope, and therefore she bore up as bravely as she could, determined to do her best under the cruel circumstances, to carefully husband her strength, and to keep her wits wide awake so as to take advantage of any chance that might arise in her favor.

There was some comfort in being allowed to ride with Linda, and yet Eva was not at all displeased when Mark Hannafin separated himself from the Shropshires and showed a disposition to travel at her side for a while.

She had something to say to him, and was also curious to discover what he had to say for himself—what he would explain, and what he would promise.

For his part it seemed to be more difficult for him to decide what he should say than what he should do.

Though noted for glibness of tongue and sufficiency of cheek, his assurance failed him at this time, and words were wanting.

He was above all things anxious to avoid offending her, and at the same time he could only reach his ends by acting in opposition to her wishes.

"So he hesitated and worked around the subject before he found himself able to say anything to the purpose.

"It is very unfortunate, Miss Talcott, that we should be driven off in this style," he observed.

"It is all very unfortunate for me," she answered quietly.

"I hope you will believe, Miss Talcott, that I am trying to do my best for your safety and comfort."

"I hope you are, sir, but must be permitted to say that I cannot find much ground for the hope. I do not see why I should go away with these people. It seems to me that by staying near the river I would be better able to reach my friends or to hear from them."

This was what was bothering Hannafin, as he knew that she was right and that he would find it no easy matter to justify himself to her.

"There's no place there that's fit to stay in," he muttered.

"A poor place is better than none, and I would have been obliged to stay there long, as a search is sure to be made for me."

"The few people who could be found in that region are a very bad set, Miss Talcott, and there was really no place to go to."

"Mr. Birch was not afraid to separate himself from these people and go back, though he was quite alone and unarmed."

"Silas Birch, Miss Talcott, is one of the most reckless fellows in the world. It would be just like him to start to swim the river or to do some rash deed of that sort, and just like him to escape with his life. He is a good swimmer, you know, as you must have noticed that when we were in the water—better than I am, I think."

This was obviously an attempt to change the subject, and at the same time to remind the young lady of the part Hannafin had borne in saving her life.

She was not at all likely to forget that; but there were other things to be considered.

Though he had saved her life, it did not follow that he was entitled to claim or control it.

"I am afraid," she said "that I am in about as bad company as I would be likely to

find, even in this region. But what must be must be, and I only hope that I may soon reach a place where I may be able to communicate with my friends. By the way, Mr. Hannafin, I have been anxious to meet you and ask you if you have sent off the message which you promised to forward to my mother."

"Dear me, Miss Talcott! That has been quite impossible, as you must know. We are far from any telegraph line—might almost as well be in the interior of Africa—and nothing could be done at night. I intended sending Ben Shropshire off with it the first thing in the morning; but this trouble has come up and knocked everything in the head."

"Could he not take it now?" suggested Eva.

"His father tells me that he can't spare him at present. But you may be sure, Miss Talcott, that I am looking out for you, and that I will do everything that can be done. Your message shall go as soon as possible."

"I hope that it will go—before the cows come home."

This simple statement seemed to startle Mark Hannafin and upset his equilibrium, as he flushed and then turned pale, at the same time darting at Eva a swift, suspicious glance.

He had lately used that expression, and he remembered it well. Was it possible that she had overheard him?

She was looking at him so blandly and innocently that his suspicions were dissipated.

"That's a queer way to talk," he muttered, "and I don't know what you mean by it. As I said, I will do my best."

"Of course you will, and you will make allowance for my anxiety and impatience. I am so unused to trouble, and so much of it has come to me so quickly. Do you really believe, Mr. Hannafin, that my brother was killed?"

"This was another shock for the young gambler.

"Killed?" he exclaimed. "Why, who would have killed him?"

"Nobody, I hope. People are killed without being killed by other people. Do you really believe that he was drowned, or killed in any way?"

"You know as much about that as I do, Miss Talcott. I suppose he must have fallen overboard. No doubt it was an accident, whatever happened to him. It is very sad. Excuse me, Miss Talcott, as I believe that Mr. Shropshire wants to see me."

Enoch Shropshire did not want to see the young man, and that statement was merely a pretext for the purpose of escaping from a conversation which had taken an embarrassing turn.

Eva was not sorry at his retreat, for she had only been experimenting with him, and had gone as far as she cared to go in that line of endeavor, as she had no wish to anger him or to arouse any suspicions that might prove inconvenient.

"How handsome he is!" murmured Linda Shropshire as he rode away.

Eva had been unable to perceive any beauty in Mark Hannafin; but it was evident that Linda loved him, and the poor girl was to be pitied.

"Handsome is as handsome does," she answered, "and I hope that he will not act unhandsonely."

"I am afraid that you have made him mad, Miss Talcott."

"If I have, he will soon get over it, and you will have him here again."

The young lady gave no more thought to him at the time, but devoted herself to noticing the country through which they were riding.

As the night was dark, there was little to be learned from such an inspection, and but little more from questioning Linda Shropshire, as the girl, though doubtless well acquainted with the country in patches, did not seem to have the faculty of making her knowledge available.

They were riding continuously through a forest—a "forest primeval"—the tall trees and level road and other characteristics showing it to be an extensive tract of bottom-land, their route leading near the foot of the bluffs.

This land was doubtless overflowed in high-water times, and occasionally sarks and sloughs were encountered, to avoid which the party were compelled to make *detours*.

It was a puzzle to Eva that they should keep down there on the low ground, where there were no human habitations worth mentioning, instead of ascending the bluff to the upper country, where they need not travel very far without finding houses and settlements.

The solution of the enigma, she was afraid, would be found in the fact that human habitations were just what the party wanted to avoid.

After daylight they halted to rest and eat their breakfast, which was prepared by Mrs. Shropshire and Linda after the men had gathered wood for a fire.

It was a very poor breakfast but better than none, and Eva pretended to enjoy it as she listened to stray talk, striving in vain to catch some hints of the probable outcome of the expedition.

She also made a pretense of friendship for Mark Hannafin, wishing to efface the suspicions that might have arisen from the remarks

she made when they last met and in this she succeeded so well that when the line of march was again taken up he rode at her side.

She was quite safe in trusting him thus far, as the presence of Linda Shropshire was a restraint upon his love-making tendencies, and nothing could be plainer than the fact that Linda was zealously watching him in the fear that he would betray a fondness for her companion.

Eva encouraged him to talk, in the hope that from his speech she might glean something of his own intentions or those of the people with whom he was connected; but she learned little beyond the statement that the Shropshires were going to visit some friends of theirs, and that from the journey's end she herself would probably soon be able to communicate with her friends.

So they traveled during the greater part of the day, and the shades of evening were descending when the actions as well as the words of her conductors assured Eva Talcott that they were nearing their destination.

CHAPTER XXIII.

A BIG REVELATION.

As they ascended a narrow pass in the steep bluff, the young lady was startled by a sharp and almost savage hail which brought the party to a sudden standstill.

The difficulty, however, was soon adjusted after the appearance of an armed man with whom Enoch Shropshire seemed to be well acquainted, and they rode on.

Eva naturally wondered what kind of goings on there could be in a free and peaceable land, where travelers were challenged by armed sentries, and the people who were found there appeared to be on a war footing.

She asked Linda, but Linda could not tell her, and Mark Hannafin had gone to the advance with Enoch Shropshire.

They halted at last in a hollow where there were two log shanties, and where several men had assembled to welcome or inspect them.

It seemed at the start to be more of an inspection than a welcome, as an elderly man who appeared to be at the head of affairs was disputing quite fiercely with Enoch Shropshire, and the others were awaiting the termination of the dispute before showing their guests any courtesy.

This difficulty, also, was soon adjusted, and Eva and Linda, with Mrs. Shropshire, were allowed to dismount and entered the big shanty.

The trouble had been mainly about the horses, though the whole business seemed to be objectionable to the elderly man, who was addressed as Colonel Rapp.

"I tell you, Enoch Shropshire," he earnestly declared, "that I have been mixed up in your crookedness too much already, and I don't want any more of it. I have hard enough work as it is to make an honest living here and keep the infernal revenue officers from getting a grip on me, and you know that I couldn't hold my own a day without the sympathy of the people about here. How do you suppose they would sympathize with me if they had reason to suspect me of being mixed up with a horse-stealing gang? They would sympathize a rope around my neck, and no blame to them."

"You won't get mixed up in this business, colonel," answered Enoch Shropshire. "Not a bit of that. Nobody would ever guess that we have come here, and we mean to run the critters off as soon as possible, anyhow."

"See that you do, then. I always have trouble enough on my hands without being bothered by anything in that line."

As Colonel Rapp turned away his attention was claimed by Mark Hannafin.

"You haven't forgotten me, I hope," observed that young man. "Surely you remember me, colonel."

"I suppose I do. Yes, I know your face well enough. What's the name, now?"

"Hannafin—Mark Hannafin."

"Of course it is. Funny name that. Sounds sorter Irish, though it's not Irish. You are the son of that lady who was so good to me when I was sick and in trouble. How did you get here, anyhow?"

"I am taking care of the young lady who came here with the Shropshires. We were on the steamer Rowena when she burned, and I saved the young lady's life by swimming ashore with her."

"Seems like you have drifted a long distance away from the shore, and I don't know why you should have come here."

"Colonel, I want to marry the young lady."

"Well, if she is willing, I don't mind. She don't look like a fool, but there's no telling. She may have little enough sense to marry you, for all I know. But I am neither a parson nor a justice of the peace, and I can't perform the ceremony."

"Of course not. I was not thinking of anything in that line. But she is a big heiress, colonel, and perhaps you can help me," insisted Hannafin.

"I am willing to do anything that is fair and right; but what do you think I can do?"

"Let her stay here and rest awhile, and we will see."

"Of course she may stay here and rest. No horse-stealing business mixed up with that. Who is she, and where is she from?"

"She is from Louisiana, and her name is Eva Talcott."

"And you say that she was on the Rowena?"

"Yes, sir."

"All right, young man. As you are the son of that lady who was so good to me, and whose kindness I shall never be able to repay, I will do anything for you that I can fairly and squarely do. Run along now. I see that Bob Shropshire wants you."

Left to himself, Colonel Rapp was evidently worried about something.

He frowned, rubbed his head and his eyes, and seemed to find it difficult to disentangle his ideas.

"It is very funny," he muttered. "If it should turn out to be so, it would be one of the queerest things I know of. I believe I will go and tackle her, and see what I can make of it."

He was in no hurry to tackle anybody, however, or to carry out the purpose, whatever it was, which he had formed.

It was not until after dark, when all had eaten their suppers, and Eva Talcott and Linda Shropshire, finding nobody to hinder them, had sallied out to enjoy the night air and converse freely, that Colonel Rapp followed them, and then it became manifest that his intention was to interview Eva.

As he spoke to her, a genuine politeness showed itself in his manner, in spite of the abruptness of his address.

"Is this the young lady?" he inquired.

"I believe that I am a young lady," answered Eva with a smile.

The old man interested her, as he seemed to be harmless and well-meaning, though she could not help fancying that there was something strange and out of the way about him.

"You are from Louisiana, I understand," said he, "and your name is Eva Talcott."

"Yes, sir."

Of course she presumed that he had got his information from Mark Hannafin, and she naturally wondered what this opening was to lead to.

"This is not the first time that I have heard the name—that is, the name of Talcott; but I can't suppose that you are in any way related to the young thief who was here the other day, and I ask your pardon for hinting at such a thing."

"I am not aware of any thief among my relatives, sir," she answered a little haughtily.

"Of course not. But you were on the Rowena, as I am told, and he claimed to have been on the Rowena."

Eva started and turned pale; but the next moment she mentally braced herself up.

"What do you mean, sir?" she demanded. "What young man are you speaking of? I would like to understand you."

"Perhaps the young man was not the real thief. I must admit that I had my doubts of that. If he was a thief, he may have been led into it by the old man who was with him, and that is quite likely, as the old man had the most of the money."

What did this mean? It was getting decidedly interesting to Eva, who saw before her a man whom it would be worth her while to conciliate, and from whom she might draw some important information. So she encouraged him to talk.

"Who was the young man, sir? You are now speaking of two. Who were they, and what have they to do with my name?"

"The old man called himself Gray Gordon, and the young man called himself Gerald Talcott."

There it was, and the revelation was a big one.

If the young lady had not been expecting some similar stroke, and had not braced herself to meet it, it would have knocked her down.

As it was, she trembled inwardly, and for a moment she found it difficult to get breath enough to set her tongue in motion.

Outwardly, however, she maintained a fair degree of composure, and when she spoke there was no special emotion visible in her tones.

"Talcott is not a very uncommon name, Mr.—I believe I heard them call you Colonel Rapp."

"That is my name, I believe. Yes, I am sure it is my name, though I was killed once, and some things have been badly mixed since then."

This was another evidence of "queerness" on the part of the old man; but Eva was so intent upon following up the revelation which she had received, that she took no notice of it.

"As I was saying, Colonel Rapp," she observed, "Talcott is not a very uncommon name; but I would be sorry to learn that it was borne by a thief. I will be greatly obliged to you if you will tell me about that young man who called himself Talcott, and also about his friend, the old man who was with him—how they happened to come here, what they had stolen, what they had to say for themselves, what became of them, and all about it."

The old man was willing enough to comply

with her request, and he proceeded to give her a detailed account of the visit of Gray Gordon and Gerald Talcott, their detention, the arrival of the Gonders, the accusation of theft, and the restitution, as he presumed it to be, of the property stolen from the flatboatmen.

"We got it all back," said he, "and then I turned them loose to shift for themselves."

"Was it not rather cruel," inquired Eva, "to send them away like that, with no means of getting food or lodging?"

"What else could be done with a pair of thieves?"

"Perhaps they were not thieves."

"There is a chance that the young man was not a thief; but they were together."

"It is a strange story, Colonel Rapp, and I thank you for telling it to me. I hope that the young man who called himself Talcott was no relative of mine. Linda, I think it is time we were getting in-doors."

Courteously bidding the old man good-night she returned to the cabin with Linda, quite glad to get away from him, as she feared that her overcharged emotion might cause her to break down and betray something which she did not then wish to be known.

She had learned that her brother was alive and in the company of the man who had befriended him on the Rowena, and that was the best news she could possibly have received.

How his disappearance had been effected was still more or less of a mystery to her, as was also the manner in which his life had been saved; but she was convinced that Mark Hannafin believed that Gerald Talcott had been "put out of the way."

That being the case, it seemed best to her that she should continue in that belief, and she did not propose to favor or confuse him with information to the contrary.

She would have the satisfaction of knowing that to the extent of that information she had a decided advantage over him, and in the mean time Gerald would surely communicate with his mother, and could not fail to search energetically for his sister.

CHAPTER XXIV.

A BAREFACED FRAUD.

THE next day the abode of the moonshiners presented the appearance of a military camp.

Work was suspended, all the men went armed, and the energies of all appeared to be devoted to the task of putting the place in condition to stand a siege, at the same time taking all possible precautions against a surprise or sudden attack.

Enoch Shropshire and his two sons were put under the same strict discipline that prevailed among the moonshiners, being distinctly informed that they were expected to bear their full share of all toils and dangers.

Colonel Rapp declared that in his opinion and according to his experience stolen horses always left a trail, and that he fully expected the owners of some of those which had been brought to his camp to follow and find them, unless they should be taken far out of the way.

"Now that you are here," he said to Enoch Shropshire, "I suppose I will have to take care of you as well as I can; but I warn you if it comes to a fight you will have to be found in the front rank."

Mark Hannafin was not counted among the fighting force, as he was not a member of the horse-stealing family, and as his prize, whatever she might be, was surely not a stolen horse.

So he informed Eva Talcott that he proposed to devote the day to his own affairs, and surprised as well as delighted her by the further information that the first business which would receive his attention would be her message to her mother.

He mounted and rode away, followed by her wondering eyes and bewildered thoughts, as this last move of his was a puzzle to her.

Did he really mean to do what he said he was going to do? If not, why should he say so and start away for that apparent purpose? What was there for him to gain by any fresh deception in that matter?

As she could not guess either of these conundrums, her only resource was to wait and see what would come of the new move, in the mean time hugging to her heart the blessed belief that her brother whom she had supposed to be lost was alive and well.

She got through the day very fairly, going about the abode of the moonshiners, perceiving the nature of the business that was done there, noticing the military aspect of the men and their warlike preparations, and at the same time studying the approaches to the place and the chances of escape in case she should determine upon flight.

It was not until late in the afternoon that Mark Hannafin returned; but he was looking very bright when he dismounted from his horse, as if he had achieved a triumph or had met some unexpected piece of good fortune.

Eva was there to meet him, if not to greet him, and he hastened to impart to her a portion of the satisfaction which he evidently felt.

"I hope you will not blame me any more," said he. "I have brought you some news at last."

"From my mother?" she eagerly inquired.

"From your mother. If you will come out here a little way, I will give it to you."

"Why not here?"

"I don't suppose that you care to let these people know anything about your business."

It seemed to Eva that there was no sufficient reason for taking her away from the house; but she was more than anxious to see her mother's message, and followed him accordingly.

He led her to a little distance from the cabins, handed her a sealed envelope which he took from his pocket, and seated himself on a log.

She made no move to take a seat near him, but stood up and scrutinized the envelope before she opened it.

It was not the usual style of telegraph envelope, having no printing on it, though the customary cabalistic letters and figures were in the lower left hand corner.

When she opened it she perceived that the message was not written on a telegraph blank, but it was not that which caused her brow to contract and her cheeks to flush as she read it.

After glancing over it she read it again carefully, the frown deepening on her brow, and then she spoke slowly and deliberately.

"Where did this come from, Mr. Hannafin?"

"From Rocky Bluff, the station from which I sent your message."

"Where is Rocky Bluff?"

"More than fifteen miles from here."

"Quite a long distance. You must have had a hard ride. If you will excuse me, I will read the dispatch again."

This was the dispatch:

"Glad to know that you are safe. Come home as soon as possible. I will send money to Rocky Bluff, but cannot send by telegraph. As you have been so long out with Mr. Hannafin, you had better come home as his wife. I hear good reports of him."

It was a strange message for a mother to send to a daughter who had just escaped from a terrible death, and it was more than strange to Eva, who naturally knew her own mother so well.

"Have you read this dispatch, Mr. Hannafin?" she coldly inquired.

"Oh, yes, I was obliged to read it before it was sealed for you, to learn whether an answer was required."

"Did it seem to you that an answer was required?"

"I sent back word that the money might come to Rocky Bluff."

"Are you sure that this dispatch came from my mother?"

"As sure as I can be of anything. I sent your message to her, and that is the answer I got."

"It is not written on a telegraph blank, and the envelope is not an official one."

"Rocky Bluff is but a small station, and the operator happened to be out of both blanks and envelopes."

"As you are acquainted with the contents of this paper, Mr. Hannafin, I would like to know what you think of the advice contained in it."

"Well, really, Miss Talcott, as my name is mentioned there, I am an interested party, you know."

"Of course you are, but perhaps you will tell me whether you believe that my mother could ever have insulted me in that way."

"Insulted you, Miss Talcott?"

"Insulted me by making such a suggestion for such a cause. It is far beyond belief. Do you not suppose that she knows me too well to imagine that I have done anything of which I should be ashamed? How did she get the thought that you might be willing to marry me, a person who deserved such an insult? How did she learn that I had been, as this paper says, out so long with you?"

These were plain and direct questions, and Mark Hannafin endeavored to answer them.

"The fact is, Miss Talcott," said he, "that I went a little beyond your instructions, and gave your mother—of course in as few words as possible, an account of your rescue and of subsequent events. But I had no idea that she would yield such a ready consent to our union."

Eva Talcott made a gesture of impatience, and contempt was plainly written in her face.

"Mr. Hannafin," she said, "you are talking nonsense. What you name as our union is impossible."

"Why should it be impossible? Your mother wishes it, and you know, Miss Talcott, that I adore you. Marry me, and you could not wish a more devoted slave than I will be."

"You are still talking nonsense. If I wished to marry I would prefer a master to a slave; but I would never marry you under any circumstances whatever."

"Why not?"

"Because I have learned to know you too well and to despise you too thoroughly."

Mark Hannafin jumped up, his dark face blazing with anger, and his utterance was thick and passionate as he spoke.

"So you thoroughly despise me, and it is a master that you want? Well, you shall have a

master, and it shall be the man you despise. If kind words and good intentions are of no use, I shall try the other way, and I tell you, Miss Talcott, that you shall be my wife before you see your home again, as sure as my name is Mark Hannafin."

Eva did not appear to be in the least moved by this threatening speech. The knowledge of her brother's safety had been a wonderful tonic for her.

"Now you are talking worse nonsense than ever," she replied. "I do not know what villainy might be accomplished by swindling and brutality, but I do know that I would never really become your wife, and I am quite sure that you would never be able to touch a dollar of the property that is believed to be mine. But I do not wish to waste words on such nonsense. I wish to say to you, Mr. Hannafin, that you do not know my mother. She is a woman who could never be persuaded to think ill of her children, and if such a suggestion as is contained in this paper should ever be made to her, I would pity the person who made it. She was born a lady, was bred a lady, and has lived the life of a lady, and it is impossible that she should take any view of the subject that would be unbecoming a lady. I presume that you have never enjoyed the acquaintance of people of that style of character. If you had it would have been better for you, and you would never have made the mistake of writing such a paper as that and trying to pass it off on me as a message from my mother."

The young man's face was livid with rage.

"Do you mean to say that I wrote that dispatch?" he fiercely demanded.

"Ask yourself—you know best. I am sure that my mother never wrote it. You must excuse me now, Mr. Hannafin, as I wish to be alone and think of what I had better do."

"Don't give yourself too much uneasiness," he answered with a sneer. "I intend to take all trouble off your hands."

"I could not allow it, sir. You have already done enough for me. Besides, I am expecting my brother."

This blow, delivered so quietly, was the hardest and most stunning blow that Mark Hannafin had yet received, just because he was quite unable to comprehend her simple statement.

"Expecting your brother?" he exclaimed, with a look and a tone of blank amazement.

"I saw him last night, and he promised to come to me."

At this his amazement deepened into absolute terror.

"You saw him last night?"

"Yes—in a dream."

She quietly walked away, leaving Hannafin in a state of mind that may well be called a muddle.

What was the matter with her? Had she gone crazy? If not, it was strange that she should speak of her dead brother in a jesting way.

CHAPTER XXV.

THE SENTRY AND THE GHOST.

EVA TALCOTT did not give herself the trouble to consider Mark Hannafin's state of mind at that moment, as she was satisfied with what she had done and with what she intended to do.

She had astonished and mystified him, as she meant to, and had been quick to interpret his consternation at her statement concerning her brother as a sure sign of guilt.

As for his threats she did not fear them, as she had decided on a course which she hoped would put her beyond the possibility of further persecutions.

She knew what to expect from him, as he had shown himself in his true colors, and there could be no doubt that, after the failure of his attempted fraud, he would resort to yet bolder measures.

She kept within the cabin during the remainder of the evening, avoiding Hannafin as much as she could without seeming to do so; but with this exception there was no change in her demeanor.

After she had retired to rest with Linda, and all was quiet about the cabin, she began to carry out her plan, which involved the co-operation of the Shropshire girl—not because she believed that the latter would be of any service to her, but because she wanted company.

"Linda," she whispered to her half-asleep companion, "do you want Mr. Hannafin to marry me?"

"Gracious me!" exclaimed the girl, startled into wideawakefulness. "Of course I don't! How can you ask such a question?"

"Because he swears that he is going to make me his wife. As he cannot do that by fair means, he says that he will try other means. Anyhow, he is determined that if I ever go home I shall go as his wife."

"Has he told you that, Miss Talcott?"

"Only a few hours ago he told me that, very plainly. I do not know how he expects to make me his wife, but that is what he says he will do."

"He'll do it, then, and it will kill me; but I won't be the only one to get hurt. Miss Tal-

cott, if he marries you, I believe I will have to kill you."

"Would it not serve the same purpose to kill him?" Eva suggested.

"Oh! I couldn't never kill him; but I'd have to kill somebody afore I died."

"It seems to me, Linda, that the best plan would be to keep him from marrying me."

"How could I do that?"

"Help me to get away from here and go home to my people."

"I wish I could, but I don't know how to do it, Miss Talcott."

"I will tell you. I have kept my eyes open since I have been here, and have studied up the best way to get out of this place. I believe I know just where to go and what to do in order to escape safely. But it is after I get out of here that my trouble begins, as I I would be about as bad as lost if I were alone. But you know much about the country and the people, and with your help I can get to a place of safety and send word to my friends. I have some money, and will get plenty more as soon as I can hear from home; so I will be able to pay our way, and you shall lose nothing by helping me. Will you go with me, Linda?"

"I hate to go away from him."

"Would you rather stay and help him to marry me? That is what it will amount to if you do not help me to get away from him."

This alternative was too much for Linda, who surrendered at once.

"I will go with you, Miss Talcott, and will help you all I can, though I am afraid it is little that I can do."

"That is right. Do you know a town or village called Rocky Bluff?"

"No."

"But there is such a place, and it lies somewhere to the west of this. We will go there. If we do not find it, there are other towns. All I want is to get where I can send word to my friends, and then we will have no more trouble."

"We can do that, I believe, Miss Talcott, if we can find our way out of here without being caught."

"Leave that to me, my dear. All you have to do is to mind what I tell you, and we will go through."

Eva waited a little longer, until all in the building seemed to be sound asleep, and then directed Linda to go out noiselessly, promising to follow her if her departure should be unobserved.

This scheme worked well, as nobody stirred, and shortly Eva slipped out and found her companion waiting for her outside.

Eva then took command of the party of two, and proceeded to carry out her plan like an old campaigner.

She had noted as carefully as she could the positions of the sentries and other arrangements of the moonshiners' camp, and knew that it would be useless to attempt to escape by the pass at which she had entered, as it was not only blocked up by a log fortification, but was so closely guarded that she could not fail to be discovered.

At the western end, however, and not far beyond the log-houses, there was a smaller and more difficult pass that led to the upper country, and here but one sentry was posted, as the pass was a mere bridle-path, was seldom used, and was not likely to be discovered where it debouched upon the upper region.

It was, however, easy enough of passage for people on foot if they should once find it, and Eva had decided that it was the exit by which she must obtain her freedom.

The question was, how should they pass the sentry, and this point had also been well considered by the young lady.

For such a plan as she proposed circumstances were both favorable and unfavorable.

The night was a bright one, the moon shining in a sky that was flecked by ragged patches of cloud which occasionally obscured her face.

The night was misty, also, as the ground was very moist and the hours of darkness were somewhat chilly, and the exhalations that arose were almost as thick as a fog, giving a weird and unnatural appearance under the moonlight to objects near at hand.

As Eva silently stole toward the place which she was seeking, circling around the heavily-timbered edge of the camp, she picked up a piece of phosphorescent rotten wood, or "fox-fire," as the natives term it.

When she reached the pass, followed closely by Linda, it was easily visible in the moonlight, and the sentry was also quite as visible, seated on a log in a position that would compel them to pass within a few feet of him, if they should pass at all.

His back was toward them, and his rifle rested across his knees, and his slouched hat had fallen down over his face, and he was either asleep in that attitude, or absorbed in profound meditation.

"We can never pass that man, Miss Talcott," whispered Linda.

"I think we can, if you will watch me and do just what I tell you to do."

"What is it?"

"I am going right up to him, and I expect to

pass him in front. When I get his attention engaged, and I hope to engage it pretty closely, you can easily slip by on this side if you make no noise."

"Oh, I will be as still as a mouse."

Eva Talcott took off her hat and attached it to her dress, let her long hair fall down upon her shoulders, and rubbed the phosphorescent wood under her eyes and on her brows.

"How do I look, Linda?" she whispered.

"Oh, Miss Talcott, you scare me."

"That suits me, but it is a man that I want to scare. Now for it!"

Eva stepped forward boldly and entered the pass, keeping well within the shadows of the trees and as far from the sitting sentry as the nature of the ground would allow her to.

In her nearly white dress, and with the phosphorus shining about her eyes, she looked to Linda Shropshire like a ghost as she glided into the pass.

Like a ghost, too, she seemed to the solitary sentry when his gaze at last rested on her.

The snapping of a twig aroused him from his reverie, and he looked up and saw it.

He was so startled that he rose suddenly, and his rifle dropped off his knees and fell to the ground with a noise.

The noise startled Eva also; but she had been expecting to be startled, and was careful not to betray her agitation.

Though she was scarcely twenty steps from him, the mist arose between her and the sentry, shrouding her with a film that not only gave her the look of a ghostly figure, but added to her apparent height and size.

The phosphorus about the eyes, and the imagination of the sentry, added the rest, and completed the supernatural character of the apparition.

As he arose and dropped his rifle, Eva halted and faced him.

As she halted, raising one arm and pointing toward heaven, her figure exalted by the misty moonlight, she presented a truly supernatural appearance from his point of view, and it was no wonder that he stood there, transfixed with amazement, if not with horror, and found himself for the moment unable to stir hand or foot.

Possibly if it had been a ghost of the male persuasion, he might have mustered up courage enough to challenge it, or even to pick up his rifle and try its temper with a bullet; but to shoot at such a ghost as that was quite out of the question.

Only a few seconds she stood there, her hand pointing upward and her eyes shining with the phosphorus, and then glided away as if the mist had absorbed her, but in reality disappeared in the dark shadows of the pass beyond.

There she was met by Linda Shropshire, who had not neglected her opportunity.

She displayed on this occasion more than her usual intelligence, and, watching her chance closely, when the sentry jumped up and stood staring at the apparition, she glided into the pass behind him as silently as a night bird, and in less than a minute was safe within the shadows with Eva.

The sentry stood and stared at nothing as if in a stupor, and it must have been fully three minutes before his senses began to come back to him.

Then he rubbed his head, stamped his feet, looked foolishly down at his rifle, and finally picked it up, but did not resume his seat on the log.

He walked further down, until he was fairly out of the pass, and there he paced to and fro in soldier fashion, looking apprehensively about, and anxiously awaiting the arrival of his relief.

He did not have long to wait, as it was then nearly midnight, and at that hour a moonshiner came to take his place.

"I am glad you have come, Sam," said the bewildered sentry. "I wouldn't stay here any longer for all the whisky we could make in a month."

"What's the matter?"

"I've seen a ghost."

"What sort of a ghost?"

"All in white, twice as tall as I am, and with eyes that blazed like fire. She started up in the pass there, and I'd scarcely got a good look at her when she melted away."

"So it was a she-ghost, was it? I wish I had had your chance. I ain't afraid of ghosts, and if she shows up again, I'll tackle her. You had better go and turn in and sleep this thing off."

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE MEETING OF THE COLONELS.

COLONEL BASTROP and his son Lawrence hastened away from Talcott's Landing, and went north as fast as steam could carry them.

As Memphis was the point from which the news of the destruction of the Rowena had been telegraphed, it was necessarily the point at which the most information was to be gained, and from which the search should start.

Of course their first visit was to a newspaper office, where they naturally expected to get the latest and most reliable intelligence; but they found nothing that specially interested them.

Further details of the disaster were plentiful, and the names of those who had been saved were more fully given, together with the names of those whose bodies had been recovered, and there were other particulars which were more or less accurate; but in no report was there any mention of the names of Gerald or Eva Talcott.

Though the captain of the Rowena, who was well acquainted with the young people, had been saved, he was seriously injured, and his mind was astray.

Hank Byers might easily have given to the press at least as much information as he gave to Gray Gordon and Gerald Talcott; but he was a "shady" character, and was noted for his ability to mind his own business.

As for Gordon and Gerald, they had been so closely occupied with their own concerns that they had not thought of furnishing anything for publication.

And so it goes frequently. Accident and mischance conspire to keep facts hidden, and matters of news are judged by what the press does not furnish, quite as much as by what it does furnish.

As Colonel Bastrop could not doubt that his young friends had been passengers on the ill-fated steamer, the necessary inference was that they were lost, and he hastened to insert in the daily papers an advertisement offering a reward for the recovery of their bodies.

Such being his belief—a belief in which he was supported by the lack of evidence rather than by evidence—it was the greatest surprise and gratification that he received more favorable news and from a quite unexpected quarter.

It was late in the afternoon of the day of his arrival, when he and Lawrence had nearly completed their arrangements for going to the scene of the disaster the next morning and beginning their mournful search, that he received a dispatch from Mrs. Talcott.

It was to this effect:

"I have delayed telegram sent from Memphis by Gerald. He believed that Eva was safe, and was about to go in search of her with some friends. I am coming on."

This put a new face on the affair, and greatly raised the spirits of Colonel Bastrop and his son.

They hastened to seek further information of Gerald and his friend, and got traces of them not only at a hotel, but at the levee where they had engaged the little steamer that carried them down the river.

The same craft was not available then, and they were looking about the levee for better means of transportation than that which they had already partly engaged, when Colonel Bastrop encountered an old friend, or, rather, was encountered by him, as the first intimation he had of the presence of his friend was a slap on the back, followed by a hearty grasp of his hand.

These demonstrations were made by a bluff middle-aged man, of fine presence and military bearing.

"Why, Louis Bastrop!" he exclaimed, "you are about the last man I would have expected to see here, and yet there is nobody whom I would be more glad to meet. You don't mean to say that you have really forgotten me?"

"Charley Crampton!" answered the amazed Louisianian. "No, I have not forgotten you; but this is such a surprise!"

They were a pair of old fellows to be calling each other Louis and Charley; but they had been college mates and old friends who had not only been separated by the war, but on opposite sides of the great conflict, one of them having commanded a regiment in the Union army, and the other holding a similar position in the Confederate army.

This meeting carried them both back to the days of their youth.

"We have been growing old, Louis, since we last met," said Colonel Crampton, and we have been through enough to give us gray hairs. I suppose that I must show my age more than you show yours, as I recognized you as soon as I saw you."

"That is because you are brighter than I am, Charley, as you always were. Here we are now, a couple of colonels, with a big past to talk about when we get time."

"Ex-colonels, if you please, Louis. For my part, I am tired of the colonel business, though everybody continues to give me the title."

"Of course you are not in the army now," suggested Colonel Bastrop.

"No, indeed; I quit as soon as the fighting was over. I am in the service of the Government, though, being one of Uncle Sam's marshals."

"Pretty good berth, is it not?"

"Well, yes, in some respects it is; but in my jurisdiction there is rather more bother and risk about it than I care for at my time of life. I am just on the point of going over the river to look up some moonshiners, and that is mighty apt to mean fight. By the way, Louis, what are you doing here?"

"We have just started to search—but you must know my son, Charley. This is Lawrence Bastrop."

"A fine young fellow, and I am glad to meet him."

"As I was saying, we have just started to search for some friends of ours who were on the Rowena when she burned."

"That was a sad disaster. Your friends were lost, I suppose."

"On the contrary, we have just learned that one of them is safe, and we hope that both are. I will tell you about it."

There was not much to tell, though it was a sad story up to the receipt of the dispatch from Mrs. Talcott, and Colonel Crampton was deeply interested.

"It is lucky that you met me, Bastrop," said he, "as I believe I will be able to help you in that business. As I told you, I am one of Uncle Sam's marshals, and am going over yonder to look up some moonshiners. I don't know just where to find them, but am expecting a man with further information. I shall take half a dozen deputies, as good men as ever sat in a saddle, and I have a steamboat engaged that is to land me wherever I want to go. If you will allow me, Bastrop, I will take you and your son aboard, and we will run down to where the Rowena was lost, and I will put myself and my men at your service. I am in no sort of a hurry to find my moonshiners, you see. Indeed, I would be much better satisfied if there were none to find."

Nothing could have pleased the Louisianian better than this offer, and he accepted it with many thanks.

"All you have to do, then," said Colonel Crampton, "is to tell me where you are stopping, and go back to your hotel and rest. As soon as I see the man I am waiting for, I will finish my arrangements, and will let you know when you are to start. By the way, have you engaged horses?"

"Horses?" exclaimed Bastrop. "What use will we have for horses?"

"None at all, perhaps; but it is well to be prepared for emergencies, as you are going into a country where you will need horses if you travel at all, and you may as well go armed, too."

"My dear friend, we are not going to hunt moonshiners."

"You don't know what you are going to hunt. Of course I shall not ask you to help me; but I am giving you good advice."

"We have our revolvers."

"That will be enough, and I will get a couple of horses for you. That is in my line, as I and my friends will go mounted. You had better go to your hotel now, and take things easy until the time for action comes. Early in the morning I will rouse you up, and you may depend upon it that I will get you to your destination sooner than you could get there without me."

Colonel Bastrop not only acquiesced in this arrangement, but was more than glad at finding the way smoothed for him so well.

He was convinced that no man could be better able to help him at that time and place than Colonel Crampton, and he considered himself remarkably fortunate in meeting his old friend and being assisted by him.

He sent an answer to Mrs. Talcott's dispatch, informing her of what he intended to do, and at an early hour he retired for the night, depending fully on his friend Crampton for the consummation of all necessary arrangements.

CHAPTER XXVII.

MEETING THE ENEMY.

BEFORE daylight the next morning, Colonel Bastrop was aroused by the other colonel, who was as fresh as a daisy in spite of his loss of sleep.

"I supposed you would want to get as early a start as possible, Louis," said he, "and so I have hurried up things, and we will get off as soon as you can dress and come down to the levee."

This was joyful news for Bastrop, who jumped out of bed and hastened to call Lawrence.

"You will get your breakfast on the boat," said Crampton, "and there is nothing else that you need worry about, unless you want a morning cocktail, as I suppose you Southerners are in the habit of that sort of thing. For my part, I quit the use of liquor a few years ago, and find myself vastly better off without it. But I am not here to deliver a temperance lecture."

Colonel Bastrop did not care for a morning cocktail, nor did Lawrence, and in a very short time they had paid their bill and were on their way to the levee with their friend.

There they found a little stern-wheel boat with steam up, and aboard the boat, besides her captain and crew, were seven men of Colonel Crampton's force, including the spy who had been expected, and horses for the entire party.

As soon as the two colonels and Lawrence had arrived, the gang-plank was hauled in, and the small steamer rounded out and puffed and paddled down the river.

During the short voyage that ensued, the two old friends amused themselves with telling stories of the war, Colonel Bastrop relating how he had captured part of Colonel Crampton's

regiment in the Red River Campaign, and would have caught his commander if he had not happened to be in the hospital at New Orleans.

They got their breakfast on the boat, prepared the commissariat for the marshal's expedition, and before noon were landed near the wreck of the Rowena.

The experience of the combined party when they had landed was quite similar to that which Gray Gordon and Gerald Talcott had previously gone through.

They were met on the shore by "Tom and Myry" and their father, who had benefited so largely by the last arrival of a steamboat there, that they naturally expected another bonanza from this one.

As they had interesting and valuable information to impart, they got their bonanza.

On this occasion they were not only able to tell of the rescue of Eva Talcott and the departure of herself and her companions with the Shropshires, but the arrival of Gray Gordon and Gerald Talcott and their movements up to a certain point.

Of Abe Lassiter and his party and the hunt for horse-thieves they either knew nothing, or kept their knowledge to themselves.

They were duly rewarded for the information they were able or willing to give, and Tom, with an eye to more "buckshee-h," offered to conduct the party to the Shropshire place; but his offer was declined, as Joe Stemmler, Colonel Crampton's scout or spy, declared that he knew the country and needed no guide.

So they mounted and rode off, quite in military style, and making no more delay than was absolutely necessary.

They found the Shropshire house deserted, as Gordon and his friends had found it, but made only a brief stay there, as it was evident that there was nobody about, and there were plenty of indications to direct their attention elsewhere.

Those indications were a great many fresh horse tracks, showing in places where the horses had been hitched at a little distance from the house, and a broad trail leading northward into which all the tracks seemed to converge.

Joe Stemmler and his comrades considered the tracks carefully, and easily arrived at the conclusion that some of them were fresher than others, proving the recent presence of two separate parties; but one party had evidently followed the other, as all the tracks joined in the same trail, and there seemed to be nothing to do but to go right on and follow them both.

So the marshal and his party mounted and rode away rapidly, as the trail was nearly as plain to them as a road.

Colonel Bastrop was quite downhearted at the discovery or lack of discovery made at the Shropshire place, as he had fully expected to find Eva Talcott somewhere near the shore, if she had really been saved from the wreck, and Colonel Crampton was equally mystified and perplexed.

"I must confess that I don't know what to make of it, Louis," said the latter. "If the young lady you are looking for really came ashore anywhere near here, I am afraid that she has fallen into bad hands. Are you sure, from the description given by those young scalawags, that the lady they spoke of was Miss Talcott?"

Colonel Bastrop could not say that he was sure; but he was decidedly of the opinion that it was Miss Talcott. He also believed that the description of the young man who came afterward answered to that of Gerald Talcott.

"Well, Louis, if we concede those two points, we must come to the conclusion that the young lady has been carried away, willingly or otherwise, and that her brother, finding her missing, has made up a party and followed the people whom he supposed her to have gone with. So the best thing for us to do will be to go right on and follow the whole outfit. What do you say to that, Joe?"

"That's jest right, colonel," answered Stemmler. "This trail leads toward the pint that you want to strike, and thar's somethin' in that."

"Of course there is, and I shall be glad if I can kill two birds with one stone. You must go in advance, Joe, and tell me if the trail branches off anywhere, or if it takes any direction different from that which you want to follow."

The trail was followed at a rapid rate until darkness set in, and it was agreed that there would be no serious difficulty in following it through the night; but the needs of food and rest were to be considered, and it was decided that it would be best to camp and take an early start in the morning.

As the party rode on the next day through the bott in-land, Joe Stemmler reported that there had been no sign of a split in the trail, and that it still led direct toward the point which he wished to reach.

So the party rode on, constantly in the same direction, and through a country whose character did not vary, until the trail turned off toward a high and rocky and wooded bluff, and then Joe Stemmler halted to give his chief

some information and receive instructions from him.

"What is it now, Joe?" inquired the marshal. "Well, colonel, our part of the business is as plain as daylight, whatever may be said of the rest of it. The moonshiners we are huntin' have thar hole right up yonder in the bluff, and that is jest whar the trail we have been follerin' leads to."

"That means business, then, and it is my plain and square duty, much as I hate to do it, to go on and catch my moonshiners."

"You will please remember, Crampton," suggested Colonel Bastrop, "that I and my son Lawrence have not lost any moonshiners, and don't care to find any."

"I understand that, Louis, and you need not suppose that I am going to ask you to help me. If my men are not enough for the work, I shall back out and postpone the job. But you must also remember that the friends you are seeking, if they are anywhere on this side of the river, have probably taken the same route that we are following, and have gone up yonder where I want to go. I can't guess how that thing has happened, but the chances are that such is the state of the case."

"You are right, Crampton, and I recognize the fact that I am in the same boat with you; but I merely wish to remark that I don't want to hurt any moonshiners."

"Nor do I want you to. It is for me, merely as a matter of duty, to open the way, and you may follow as you please. But I must first get an idea of what I am going into, so that I may settle on the best way to take hold of this business. Here, Joe!"

Joe Stemmler, who had gone a little ahead of the party to reconnoiter, returned hastily to his chief.

"Now, Joe, as you know a good deal more about those moonshiners than any of the rest of us, I want you to tell me how many there are of them, and how they are fixed."

"Well, sir, Colonel Rapp is the head man, and—"

"Thunder and spikes! Do you hear that, Colonel Bastrop? There is another colonel mixed up in this business, and that makes three of us. I doubt if there was ever a war that produced such an abundant crop of colonels. Well, I am glad that I have a colonel to contend with in this affair, as that gives it a military tinge, and makes it look a little more warlike. I ask your pardon for interrupting you, Joe; but I really could not help myself."

"As I was goin' on to say, sir, when you bust in, Colonel Rapp generally keeps eight or ten good men about him, and thar's no tellin' who or how many have gone in thar lately; but you see that the trail is a big one."

"Yes, and I am afraid that they will prove to be too many for us to tackle. But we must try to get in there. What are the chances for sneaking in, Joe?"

"Tolable poor, I'm afeard. They can block up the way as easy as winkin' if they know we're comin', and they're mighty apt to know it, so they keep a good lookout all the time."

"We will have to go at it in military style, then, and we will do that right away. How far up there is their den?"

"About a quarter of a mile, I should say."

Under the instructions of the marshal the party dismounted, hitched their horses in the timber, and moved slowly and cautiously up the slope, guided by Joe Stemmler.

Colonel Crampton was in the advance, and all had their rifles ready for sharp work at any moment.

They had not gone near a quarter of a mile when a hail followed by a shot brought them to a sudden halt.

They hastily sought cover, and directly the hail was repeated, this time more clearly and fully.

"Better keep off, there! Who are you, and what do you want?"

"We want *you*!" yelled Colonel Crampton. "You had better surrender peaceably, as we mean to take you dead or alive."

"You can't begin to take us. Come on, you durned scoundrels, and you will get what you have been sendin' for a long time."

"Well, boys, that means business," said the marshal to his men. "They have been waiting for us, and it is clear that they mean to give us a tough time."

"Thar must be a crowd of 'em," observed Joe Stemmler, "or they wouldn't have met us so far from their den. Durned if I can see into it, anyhow."

"That is what we have got to find out. Move forward carefully, boys, and keep well under cover, and see if you can draw their fire."

As far as drawing the fire of the concealed enemy was concerned, this attempt was successful, as well as disclosing their position.

The fire was much to the purpose, and the position was seen to be a strong one.

Firing then became pretty brisk on both sides; but both were cautious and well covered, and no special damage was done, as far as the assailants knew, except the slight wounding of the marshal's deputies.

The arrival of darkness put a stop to the en-

agement; but Colonel Crampton kept his men in position, hoping to creep up on the wary foe during the night.

Curiosity and companionship had caused Colonel Bastrop and Lawrence to advance with the others, and after the cessation of the combat Lawrence took it into his head to reconnoiter, creeping forward for that purpose over the rocks and through the bushes.

It so happened that one of the opposing party had left his friends with a similar object in view, and had come nearly within reach of Lawrence when he stumbled in the darkness and fell down a steep little incline.

Instantly Lawrence Bastrop pounced on him and shouted to his friends:

"Come here quick! I've got one of them!"

CHAPTER XXVIII.

BETWEEN TWO FIRES.

GRAY GORDON accepted his good luck in finding the Gonders and getting his money back from them as an augury of further good luck, and was in high spirits when he got back to the Shropshire house, though he failed to inspire Gerald with any of his enthusiasm.

That young gentleman was fretting at about the delay, though he could not help admitting that it had been necessary.

Fortunately for his peace of mind, it soon came to an end, the messenger who had been sent out by Abe Lassiter returning with horses for Gordon and Gerald and their two companions.

Then they mounted and rode northward at a good rate of speed, and there was no further delay, except such as was caused by the necessity of "foddering up," and that operation was shortened as much as possible.

It was easy enough for any of the party to follow the trail, but Jerry Mabry was the one who informed them when they were approaching the end of it.

"That's a fact," remarked Gordon. "I have good cause to know something about the place we are coming to, and it is strange that Gerald and I are here again. I remember an old saying that all roads lead to Rome. I don't pretend to know what that means; but it does seem to be a fact that all the roads I take bring me here in the end."

There could be no doubt that the trail which the party had followed from the Shropshire house led up the bluff and to the headquarters of the moonshiners.

It was sunset when this point was reached, and as night would soon be coming on, it was not supposed that the party would be able to do any effective work before morning, if they should meet the opposition which they expected.

However, it would be possible to feel the position of their antagonists, ascertain their force, and perhaps make a rush that would carry them through.

This movement was successful as far as regarded its first object, but an utter failure as far as it contemplated a surprise.

The moonshiners and their allies, fully prepared to meet an attack, were not to be surprised.

Abe Lassiter and his party rode slowly up the bluff, intending to go as far as their horses would carry them, and had reached the point where Gordon and Gerald were captured, when a hail and challenge from above brought them to a stop.

"Hello, thar!"

"Hello, yourself!" answered Lassiter.

"Halt whar you are! Who are you, and what do you want?"

"We are huntin' a gang of horse-thieves."

"Thar ain't no hoss-thieves about here."

"We have tracked them here."

"Thar ain't no hoss-thieves here, I tell you."

"If that is the case, we are friends of yours, and don't want to harm anybody. So you may as well let us come in."

"Nary come in. It's ag'inst orders. Keep away, or you'll git hurt."

The pursuing party had caught sight of a log fortification that blocked up the pass, and the gleam of rifle-barrels showed that it was well defended; therefore they wisely determined that it would be better to pause and consider the matter than to expose their lives to useless risk.

So they halted where they were, found a safe and retired spot where they could bopple their horses and prepare something for themselves to eat, and proceeded to put the pass in a state of siege.

Abe Lassiter and Jerry Mabry, with most of the others, had served in the war, and they made their war knowledge available, and naturally fell into warlike methods.

Pickets were put out, stations and duties were assigned to each of the party, and artillery was the only military element that appeared to be lacking.

Having thus settled themselves for the night, they awaited developments on the part of the enemy.

No demonstration was heard in that quarter, and they heard nothing but the occasional blows of an ax and the falling of a tree, which indicated that the defenses of the pass were being strengthened.

In the morning the position in front of them

was closely viewed and carefully studied, and afterward a council of war was held, at which it was agreed that it would be like storming a battery to attempt to carry the fortification that blocked up the pass.

Jerry Mabry professed to be well acquainted with the locality, and Gray Gordon and Gerald Talcott had been up as far as the still, and the three were of the opinion that the pass could be easily made impregnable, and the others were equally satisfied that it had been made impregnable.

From the best data obtainable it was supposed that the combined force of the moonshiners and their allies amounted to twelve or fifteen men, probably reaching the latter figure.

Though they might be slightly outnumbered by the party from below, they occupied a position in which a few men were easily equal to many.

As that position was not assailable by a direct attack, the next point to be considered was whether it might be carried by a flank or rear movement.

Jerry Mabry was obliged to confess that he knew nothing about the rear aspect of the moonshiners' den, and Gordon and Gerald had not been beyond the two cabins.

It was presumed that there must be an opening in that direction, but, as it would probably be tedious to reach and difficult to find, other means would be preferable, if there were any.

None could be thought of except a flank attack, the outlook for which was not at all promising.

By climbing the precipitous hills through which the narrow path ran it might be possible to gain a position overlooking the pass, from which its defenders could be seriously worried, and a few daring and active men prepared to make the attempt.

The moonshiners had kept quiet as long as they were not molested, and it seemed to be their policy not to do any fighting unless they were driven to it; but when this aggressive movement began they woke up and proved themselves to be alive and on the alert.

The climbers found it difficult to reach the positions they desired to attain, and when they got up there found it yet more difficult to secure cover that would enable them to stay there with a reasonable degree of safety.

They also discovered that their opponents had anticipated such a contingency by the extension of the fortification with which they had blockaded the pass.

As one of the men who had been in Lee's army observed, it was as tough a job on a small scale as Fredericksburg or Cold Harbor.

Whenever one of the men up there attempted to get a shot at the defenders of the pass he became the mark for bullets that compelled him to "hunt his hole," and yet the moonshiners did not waste a shot, never firing unless the aggressive attitude of their assailants compelled them to.

At the same time it was evident that the attempt from above did not create any diversion in favor of the attacking party below, or give them any chance to make a rush at the barrier, and so the men up there were finally ordered down.

It was agreed, after a consultation, that if they could have men enough to maintain several sharpshooters on the heights, and at the same time keep a sufficient force below for a front attack, they might be able to drive their antagonists out of the pass, but they were obliged to admit that they did not have men enough to effect both of these objects.

These futile attempts, tedious and laborious as they were, had occupied the greater portion of the day, and Gray Gordon and Gerald Talcott, who had the closest and deepest interest in the affair, had become disheartened at the failure of the operations thus far, when there was a new and entirely unexpected and surprising change in the programme.

One of the party who happened to be in the rear came hastening to his comrades with the astounding information that a number of men were advancing up the bluff with the apparent intention of attacking them.

"The scoundrels are carrying the war into Africa!" exclaimed Gordon; "and they must have a much bigger force than we had supposed they had. They have sent part of their men around to take us in the rear, hoping to shut us up between two fires and pound the life out of us."

This was the opinion of the others, though the new phase of the conflict was so surprising to all, and it was instantly resolved that they would fight the fight for all it was worth, some consolation being found in the fact that they would have a fair chance at the new-comers, who would be sheltered by no barricades.

No time was lost, and under the directions of Abe Lassiter and Gray Gordon the men faced about and took the best available positions for defense against the new enemy.

They were sure that the advantage of location was on their side, and that they might hope to beat off their foes unless they should be largely outnumbered, or unless, as was highly probable, those behind the barricade should

take advantage of their predicament to pounce upon them.

The new arrivals were duly challenged, and the result showed that they meant fight, and nothing but fight.

So the fight began, and it may be safely asserted that when darkness put a stop to it, neither of the parties to the conflict was better pleased than the party which had expected to find itself between two fires.

They had received a fresh surprise, and a most gratifying one, from the fact that not a shot had been fired from the barricade behind them, and no sort of a demonstration had been made from that direction.

When the firing had ceased they huddled together in the darkness, not daring to light a fire to cook their supper, and discussed the situation in a style which showed that they were utterly bewildered by the turn their affairs had taken.

"I can't seem to make this thing out," said Gordon, whose opinion was generally deferred to, as he was considered very clear-headed. "If those scoundrels, as I said awhile ago, had sent a party around to take us in the rear and shut us up between two fires, the gang above would have been sure to pitch in when their friends attacked us from below; but they kept as still as mice and let us entirely alone. It don't seem to me that the two gangs are working together."

"Yet those folks down thar said that they'd come for our scalps, and meant to have 'em," suggested Lassiter.

"That's so; but it is just possible that they are barking up the wrong tree, and it is some other folks' scalps they want. Perhaps it is some other party that has come here to look for horse-thieves, or even for moonshiners."

"If thar should have been such a mistake as that, Mr. Gordon, we ought to find it out, though it's bad for poor Billy Hickman, who has got a bullet-hole in his leg."

"Well, it is not likely that there will be any more fighting before morning, and then we will try to get a talk with them and find out what this thing means."

Gerald Talcott, however, took it into his head that he would do a little scouting on his own account under cover of the darkness, with the view of finding out the facts of the situation and springing them on his friends as a surprise.

So, leaving his rifle in the camp, and armed only with his revolver, he stole away without informing anybody of his intention, and started down the broken and rugged slope toward the position occupied by their recent foes.

It was a daring attempt—not to say foolhardy—for a young fellow who was quite unaccustomed to that sort of thing; but he had his own ideas of what he could and would do, and proceeded to carry them out.

Of course he put his foot in it.

That is to say, as he was carefully working his way down the difficult ground in the darkness, he caught his foot in a vine at the edge of a steep descent, and tumbled headlong.

The next moment he was seized by one of the opposing party who happened to be stationed there, and a struggle began which raised a great commotion in both camps.

CHAPTER XXIX.

MARK HANNAFIN'S TRIBULATIONS.

THE disappearance of Eva Talcott and Linda Shropshire came on top of another excitement which was deemed of more importance by most of those in the moonshiners' camps than that was.

Indeed, the only person who was deeply interested in it was Mark Hannafin, and circumstances controlled him to an extent that was far beyond his desires.

The excitement referred to was caused by the arrival of the party headed by Lassiter, and that naturally took precedence of everything else in the minds of the moonshiners and the Shropshire family, as it concerned the preservation of their lives and property, stolen and otherwise.

Information of the approach of the pursuers was promptly conveyed to the cabins, and Colonel Rapp and the Shropshires, accompanied by Mark Hannafin and most of the moonshiners, hastened down into the pass to direct and assist the defense of the den.

The position was naturally so strong, and had already been so well fortified that it was only necessary to guard it carefully and watch all the points closely, and the moonshiners had no fear that it would be carried by assault or otherwise.

Yet they were considerably annoyed and perplexed when they learned what sort of men composed the assailing party and what their intentions were.

Their object was made plain when they declared that they had come there to look for horse-thieves, and further evidence was furnished by Ben Shropshire.

"I know the cuss who yelled at us," said he, "and this ain't the first time that I've heard his voice, dog-gone him!"

"Who is he?" inquired Enock Shropshire.

"Why, pap, don't you know him? It's Abe Lassiter, who lives up on the Sandy Hill road."

"Yaas, he lost a couple o' hosses a while ago, and allowed that somebody mought ha' stole 'em."

"So it is you that they are after," broke in Colonel Rapp. "This is too durned bad, but I suppose it can't be helped."

"They can't git in here, anyhow," observed the elder Shropshire.

"I don't believe they can; but I wish that they had never come. This is the worst scrape I have been in yet, and I can't tell you how I hate it. If it was a lot of Uncle Sam's men, wanting to pull me up for making whisky, I could stand it well enough; but I was never mixed up in a horse-stealing scrape before, and I don't like it."

"You better believe it," protested Shropshire.

"I am, and you know I am. You have mixed me up in it. Well, I may as well be hung for a sheep as for a lamb, and now that I am in I shall go in all over. Now that you are here I will take care of you, and those folks sha'n't get hold of you, no matter who they are or what they are after."

As Colonel Rapp was known to be a man of his word, with plenty of grit, and backed by a determined set of followers, the Shropshires felt quite safe after this assurance.

They and their allies remained at the fortification during the night, awaiting an attack which did not come, and the conclusion was that none would be made before morning, though it was evident that the attacking party was on hand and ready for business.

Under the directions of Colonel Rapp his followers strengthened the defenses and added to them during the night, and took turns in keeping guard and sleeping on the ground.

It was the absence of most of the men on this business that enabled Eva Talcott and Linda Shropshire to slip out of the log-house and escape without being observed.

Mark Hannafin remained in the pass during the night, and in the morning, when skirmishing began and a real fight appeared to be imminent, he was retained there by the express order of Colonel Rapp.

"You are mixed up in this, young man, the same as the rest of us," said the moonshiner, "and you have got to bear your part of whatever the difficulty calls for."

Hannafin protested that he was neither mixed up in horse-stealing nor in moonshining.

"You are caught in bad company, then, and must take the consequences. You have an affair of your own on hand, too, and you can't expect us to help you unless you turn in and help us."

This necessity went decidedly against the grain with the young man, who was strongly averse to doing anything that might mark him as a law-breaker; but he had too much sense to attempt anything like open rebellion.

He did not lose much sleep during the night, and in the daytime was careful not to fire a shot or to expose himself where he would be fired at.

It was not, however, until noon that he was allowed to leave the pass and return to the headquarters of the moonshiners, and when he got there he speedily learned of the disappearance of Eva Talcott and Linda Shropshire.

It was naturally first discovered by Mrs. Shropshire, who missed the two girls from their sleeping place when she rose at an early hour in the morning, but missed them more acutely when she wanted Linda to help her get breakfast for the entire family, and could not find her.

After yelling for the girl in shrill and strident tones, she was obliged to call in one of the men to help her, and she loudly declared that she would give Linda "a good frailing" when she got back.

Linda did not come back to get the "frailing," and at breakfast-time neither of the missing ones put in an appearance.

After a period of waiting which largely increased the wrath of "Aunt Eliza," search was made for them, and the search resulted in the report that they were not to be found anywhere about the premises.

The supposition that they had merely been strolling about for their pleasure was abandoned, and the presumption was that they had run away; but how could they have got away, and where could they have gone to?

It was manifestly impossible that they should have climbed the lights that inclosed the hollow, and equally impossible that they should have gone down through the pass, and there was no other way of exit but the opening at the upper end, and that was guarded.

Such was the condition of affairs when Mark Hannafin came up from the pass, and he was greatly excited by the intelligence that greeted him.

What had become of the missing ones was still the puzzle until the moonshiner who had relieved the sentry who saw the ghost was struck by an idea.

It was apparently a funny idea, as he held down his head and "snickered" in a style that aroused the anger of Mark Hannafin.

"What is the matter with you?" demanded

the young man. "I don't see anything to laugh at."

"You must excuse me, Cap. I was jest a-thinkin' about that durned fool, Sam Wilsey."

"Who is he, and what is the matter with him?"

"He was on guard up thar till midnight, and when I went to take his place he told me that he had seen a ghost, and a she-ghost at that. I laughed at him then, but now I am beginnin' to think that thar was suthin' in it."

"What was in it?"

"Why, that them gals had slipped by him and gone out that way."

Sam Wilsey was called in and questioned, and when he told his story as he had told it to his comrade, Mark Hannafin was also of the opinion that the fugitives had passed him and gone out.

"I don't believe a durned word of it," replied Wilsey. "Anyhow, thar was only one of 'em, and that I'll swear to."

"That's the way with folks who see ghosts," declared his comrades. "They either see a durned sight too much, or not nigh enough. Them gals have skipped out, and that's the way they went."

"For my part," broke in Mrs. Shropshire, "I don't keer a cuss how or whar they went. That gal of mine ain't no good, nohow, and t'other one was more trouble than she's wuth to us. Jest let 'em slide; but if I ever do ketch holt of that Lindy, I'll make her suffer."

Mark Hannafin was not at all disposed to "let them slide," and prepared to go in search of them immediately.

Pocketing a little bread and meat, and taking his rifle as well as his revolver, he hastened to the narrow pass at the head of the hollow.

There he was stopped by the sentry on duty, who positively refused to allow him to go further without a pass from Colonel Rapp.

So he was obliged to return to the post below, and there he had to tell the story of the disappearance of Miss Talcott to the chief moonshiner, who kept him "hanging around" for some time before he would comply with his request.

"I can't see that we owe you any favors," said Colonel Rapp. "You have not lifted a finger to help us when we were in trouble, and why should we help you?"

"I don't want any help," answered Hannafin. "I only want to get away from here."

"To hunt that young lady, I suppose. Well, I shoudn't wonder if she has taken the best course for herself, and if she is well out of your way now. Here is your pass, and good riddance to you!"

The old man made a mark on a chip, which served Mark Hannafin as his pass out of the den of the moonshiners.

It was then pretty late in the afternoon, and shortly after the young man had left him Colonel Rapp received a surprise in the shape of an event which to him and those with him was quite incomprehensible.

The party opposed to him had not only withdrawn the sharpshooters who had been trying to flank his position and pick off his men, but had started a fusillade of scattering shots, none of which were fired at moonshiners or horse-thieves.

There seemed to be, indeed, a regular fight going on down there, and who could the contending parties be?

This was a puzzler to Colonel Rapp and his friends, and with their best efforts they were unable to solve it.

Bob Shropshire who was an adept in the arts of creeping and sneaking, undertook a scout in the direction of the scrimmage, but succeeded in discovering nothing further than the fact that the men who had been fighting his comrades were firing vigorously at some men further down the pass, who were answering the fire quite as freely.

"Now's our time, colonel!" said the moonshiner who was next in command to Colonel Rapp and in charge of the defenses in the pass.

"Now's our time, old man! While those cusses are fightin' t'other cusses down below, all we've got to do is to pounce down on 'em and wipe 'em out without half tryin'."

"We'll do nothing of the kind," answered the chief. "We are here on the defensive, and not a shot must be fired or a move made except in self-defense. The fight that is going on down there is right into our hand, and the two sides, whoever they may be, may hammer away as long as they please for all we care. I only hope that they will make an end of each other."

When darkness had closed down upon the scene it seemed as if they must have made an end of each other, to judge by the cessation of firing and the intense stillness that prevailed.

"That's all there is of it for to-night," said Colonel Rapp. "If they haven't wiped each other out, they will begin the game again in the morning, and we are safe, anyhow."

CHAPTER XXX.

BABES IN THE WOODS.

EVA TALCOTT and Linda Shropshire in the meanwhile were not having a bit of a good time.

When they had got by the sentry in the little pass they imagined that their troubles were ended, whereas in fact they were just begun.

They had escaped from their enemies, or Eva had, and were presumably safe; but where were they?

It was evident that they were in a narrow pass from which there was no exit at either side, and therefore they could only go straight ahead; but it was as dark as a rat hole in there, and they could only make their way by feeling, not being able to see, as the saying is, the hand before the face.

They kept as close together as they could, for the sake of company, though there was no fear that they would lose each other, and were continually running against trees and into bushes, and stumbling over rocks and other obstructions, so that their progress was not only slow but painful.

At the same time they were oppressed by two fears, both of which were entirely imaginary, but were not on that account any the less vivid.

Eva Talcott was afraid of wild beasts, though it would have been hard to find in that region anything that was more dangerous than a 'coon, and Linda Shropshire was afraid of ghosts, though Eva solemnly assured her that there were no such things as ghosts.

Though it was but a short distance to the head of the little pass, it took them a long time to travel it, and when they were through they were so worn out by toil and anxiety that they were obliged to stop and rest.

They knew when they had got out by the fact that they were able to see each other and to discern objects at a little distance, though it was dark enough where they were.

Yet they were but little better off than when they were in the rat hole, as they had emerged in a rough and broken country, a tangle of hills and ravines into which they did not dare to venture in the absence of daylight.

For a while they actually missed and regretted the narrow and dark pass below, as they could not go astray there, and the only drawback was the difficulty of going at all, whereas after they had got out there was no road, nor any trail as they could see, and they were liable to go astray and lose themselves.

This was just what happened, though they were not aware of the fact at the time, as they wandered off into a ravine that led them in a different course from that which they wished to follow.

They had not gone far when daylight came to cheer them if not to help them, and they were then obliged to admit that they did not know where they were or whither they should go.

"Do you know a town or place called Rocky Bluff, Linda?" inquired Eva.

Linda did not know any such place.

"I believe there is such a place, though, and that is where I would like to go to, if I knew how to reach it."

The solemn truth was that Rocky Bluff existed only in the imagination of Mark Hannafin, who had not only manufactured the telegram, but had invented the place at which he claimed to have received it.

"I reckon our best chance," observed Linda, "will be to keep goin' straight on until we strike a road and find some people who will tell us whar to go and what to do."

"But we must have been missed by this time from the place we left, and of course they will follow us. They will expect us to go straight ahead, and we had better deceive them by turning aside, so that they may not be able to find us."

This deep design was put in execution, and the result was that the two girls, who had already turned aside without knowing it, made another turn in their course, which bid fair to become a circumdubus if they should keep on traveling, bringing up at the point from which they had started.

But they did not keep on traveling, as an accident occurred which upset their plans.

In going down a rough descent Eva was tripped by a vine and fell, bruising her arm and side, and spraining her ankle badly.

It was immediately manifest that this was a most serious accident, as the young lady was utterly unable to walk or even to rise.

The sadness of this trouble was fully appreciated by both of them, and Eva broke down and began to cry.

"Please don't take on so, Miss Talcott," entreated Linda. "You'll git over it arter awhile, and then you'll be all right ag'in."

"A long time, I am afraid, and what will we do until then? How will we live?"

"Well, I reckon we'll have to git yot into some sort o' shelter, whar you can rest and take things easy, and then I must skirmish around and hunt some victuals."

Linda found a pleasant spot near by in the shelter of a clump of bushes, and without much difficulty got Eva there.

Then she gathered some leaves, which she bruised and bound upon the injured ankle, making an embrocation that had a cooling and soothing effect.

Having made her friend as comfortable as possible, she prepared to go away in search of food and perhaps of help, though Eva dreaded being left alone.

"I am so afraid," said the young lady, "that you will get lost and I will never see you again."

"You needn't be a bit afeard o' that, miss," answered Linda. "I can find my way anywhar about the woods in the daytime, and I'll fetch back here to you, jest as sure as shootin', no matter whar I go."

Eva gave her friend some money with which to purchase what was needed, and summoned all her strength of mind to sustain her during what she feared would be a long siege of solitude.

It was a long siege, and all her powers of endurance were needed to support her, as she was worried in mind and weakened in body by pain, as well as exhausted by lack of food and sleep.

Noon had come and passed before Linda returned; but when she did at last arrive, she was so joyful because of the success of her expedition that she did not seem to feel the fatigue of the long tramp.

She had found a little log house in a clearing, where the people, poor and ignorant as they were, had been so kind and obliging that she was greatly cheered and encouraged.

They had not only furnished her with a basket of food and a drinking-cup, for which they refused to take any pay, but had offered, when Linda had told them as much as it was advisable to tell, to send their team to bring away the sick lady and take her wherever she wished to go.

As Linda did not know how this proposition might strike her friend, she declined it for the present, promising to bring Eva to the house in the clearing as soon as she was able to travel, or to return and claim the offered help.

"I don't really believe, Miss Talcott," said she, "that that wagon o' theirs could be fetched in here anyhow through the hills and the timber; but, if you don't git well enough to walk afore long, I'll make a try fur it."

"We need not hurry," answered Eva. "I think that we are safe in this hiding-place from any search that may be made for us, and, as we have enough to eat and drink, we may as well wait until to-morrow morning. If I am not able to travel then, you may go for help."

In the morning the condition of the young lady's ankle was sensibly better; but she was not yet able to walk, and it was not considered safe for her to make the effort.

So, after they had eaten their breakfast and nearly finished the contents of the basket, it was agreed that Linda should go to the little farmhouse for help, and she started off cheerily, promising to return as soon as possible.

Things do not always turn out in this world according to our calculations. Frequently the outcome is worse than we expect, but sometimes it is better. The help which Linda Shropshire found was vastly different from that which she had expected to bring to her friend.

CHAPTER XXXI.

SURPRISES ALL AROUND.

If Eva Talcott could have known how near help was to her at that time, and what sort of help it was, she would have crawled toward it on her hands and knees.

Ever since she had received that welcome revocation from Colonel Rapp, she had been greatly comforted and strengthened by the belief that her brother was alive and probably seeking her; but she could not have imagined him to be as near to her as he happened to be just then.

When Gerald Talcott slipped up, or down, on his ambitious little scout, and fell into the hands of the enemy, he was seized by an active young man who gripped him firmly; but he might possibly have extricated himself from the grasp of his antagonist if the friends of the latter had not promptly answered his call and come to his assistance.

They did come, and the spy was easily secured; but when he arose and faced his captors the effect was startling and sensational.

"Gerald Talcott!" exclaimed the man who had grabbed him. "Is this really you?"

"Is that you, then, Lawrence?" replied the astonished captive. "And there is Colonel Bastrop, too! How on earth did you ever get here? What does this mean?"

Explanations were interrupted by a commotion further up the pass.

Gray Gordon, who had noted the absence of his young friend, and was looking for him when the shout was raised below, jumped instantly to the conclusion that he was the captive who had fallen into the hands of the enemy.

Hastening in that direction, he shouted at the top of his voice:

"Look out what you do there! If you hurt a hair of that young man's head, we will bound you to the death!"

The answer that came back was surprising in the extreme.

"It's all right!" yelled Gerald. "Come down here, Mr. Gordon! These are friends!"

Gordon scrambled down the slope as fast as

he could, and found Gerald shaking hands with several men with whom he was conversing in the most familiar manner.

The young man introduced his friend to Lawrence Bastrop and the two colonels, Bastrop and Crampton, and explanations then came thick and fast.

"Why, Mr. Gordon, and Gerald," exclaimed Colonel Bastrop, "we had not the least idea that it was you we were fighting. Who are those people with you, and how did you get here?"

"They are a party of men from down the river who are hunting a gang of horse-thieves, and Gerald and I are seeking his sister, who has been carried off by the horse-thieves. Who are you people, and how did you happen to come here?"

"Colonel Crampton is a United States Marshal, and he and his deputies are hunting moonshiners, and my son and I are looking for Miss Talcott."

"We have all come to the right place. The moonshiners are in there and so are the horse-thieves, and I believe that Miss Talcott is with them."

Gordon hastened to inform Abe Lassiter and his comrades of this amazing discovery, and they came trooping down to fraternize with the men whom they had lately been fighting.

"It seems to me," remarked Colonel Crampton, "that this trouble might have been avoided if there had been a little more sense on my part. We heard of Mr. Gordon and Mr. Talcott down the river near the wreck of the Rowena, and we presumed that they were searching for Miss Talcott. The only trail we could find brought us here; but when we found such a large force ready to meet us and full of fight, we thought of nothing but moonshiners then, and pitched right in."

"We had been trying all day to get at the moonshiners and horse-thieves," said Gordon, "and when you turned up we supposed that they had sent a party to take us in the rear, and that was what made us so ready to fight."

"Well, Mr. Gordon, I hope that there is not much harm done. One of my men is slightly wounded. How is it with your side?"

"One of our Arkansas men is pretty badly hurt."

"We must bring him down here and attend to him, as I am a pretty fair surgeon."

"That's enough of us here now," observed Abe Lassiter, "to wipe out the moonshiners and the horse-thieves, too, if we can get at them right. I and my folks don't go in for worryin' moonshiners as a general thing; but this set is harborin' a gang of horse-thieves, and that makes them fair game."

"That is what we must do, Mr. Lassiter. We will join our forces, and I have no doubt that we will soon be able to clean out the whole business when we have daylight to work in."

"As there are so many of you now," suggested Gordon, "you won't miss a man or two, and I have a little scheme in my mind that I want to try on right away."

His friends were anxious to know the nature of his little scheme.

"I want to go up through the hills to-night, pass the camp of the moonshiners, and look for an opening at the other end."

"You will only get lost in the darkness, and come out nowhere," objected Colonel Crampton.

"I don't think I will. I shall take Jerry Mabry with me, who says that he knows the way through in darkness as well as in daylight, and who is sure that there is an opening to the den up yonder. I can't pretend to say what I will do when I find it, but I hope to be in a position to help you, as well as to look after Miss Talcott. I would be glad to have Gerald go with me if he is willing."

Gerald was more than willing, and he and Gordon, with Jerry Mabry as their guide, set off without any further delay.

The night was considerably darker than was agreeable, and, if it had not been for Jerry's familiarity with that style of traveling, coupled with his remembrance of the locality, they would have been lost soon after they left their friends.

As it was, they made slow progress, and found the journey a long and wearisome one, though the distance was by no means great.

It was also a dangerous one, as Jerry Mabry lost his way more than once, and they found themselves in places where a misstep might cause a fall that would be attended by serious consequences.

They got through all right and without any harmful accident; but it was not until after daybreak that they reached the broken country at the west of the moonshiners' camp.

Then Jerry lost his way in looking for the opening which he expected to find there, and they wandered about at random, seeking the faint trail which was believed to lead to the hollow below.

At last they found it, and had halted to consult upon the next step to be taken, when an unexpected occurrence changed the current of their thoughts and intentions.

A young man was seen walking slowly up the trail, looking closely on each side as he came,

and he was easily recognized by two of the party.

They had halted in the shade of a clump of bushes, and it was evident that he had not seen them.

"Down, boys!" ordered Gordon, and the three went out of sight together.

"That is Mark Hannafin, Jerry," whispered the leader—"the scamp I told you about—and we want him very badly. Keep quiet and out of sight, now, until he comes near enough, and then we will nab him."

On came Mark Hannafin, occasionally looking down at the trail for certain footprints that would have been hard to find if they had been there, and occasionally pausing to gaze at the forest on either side of the path, until he was nearly opposite to the clump of bushes where the three men were concealed who wanted him so badly.

"Now, boys!" whispered Gordon, and they rose suddenly, and stepped out from their concealment, and confronted the young man with three leveled rifles.

He was carrying his rifle in his right hand, but made no attempt to raise it, standing there motionless, as if fixed to the spot by horror or amazement.

"Drop that gun, and throw up your hands!" ordered Gordon.

Hannafin obeyed the order instantly—not, perhaps, through fear, but because he was utterly astounded by what he saw before him.

There stood Gerald Talcott, whom he had thrown into the merciless Mississippi and believed to be drowned, and with him was Gray Gordon, who had mysteriously disappeared from the Rowena at the same time.

Of all men living—or dead, for that matter—these two were the last whom Mark Hannafin would have expected to encounter at that time and place.

How had they escaped, and how had they come there to confront him?

These questions were soon to be answered to his entire dissatisfaction.

"Pick up his gun, Jerry, and get his pistol if he has one," was Gordon's next order, and the young gambler stood disarmed and helpless before his captors.

"I perceive that you have not forgotten us," continued the leader. "This is Gerald Talcott, whom you tried to kill by pitching him into the river."

"He attacked me," answered Hannafin, "and it was by accident that he went overboard."

"We have our opinion of the kind of accident it was. I am Gray Gordon, who went overboard after him, and with my help he got ashore. Since then we have been on your trail, and now we have got you."

"What do you mean to do with me, then? I am in your power, but I tell you at the beginning that you can't scare me."

"We are not trying to scare you," interposed Gerald, "and we would prefer not to hurt you, if you have done no more damage than we now know of. It is not because you attempted to take my life that we have followed and caught you. I understand that you saved the life of my sister, or helped to save it, and that may serve as a set-off to the harm you did me. But there is another account to be settled—and the question is now, what have you done with Miss Talcott? Where is she?"

"I don't know," sullenly answered Hannafin.

"You don't know!" exclaimed Gordon. "Come, young man, it won't do to begin this business with a lie. We traced you and Miss Talcott to the Shropshire place, and from there you came on with that gang of horse-thieves to the camp of the moonshiners in the bluffs below here. Now we want to know what has become of Miss Talcott?"

"I don't know."

"You had better make a clean breast of it, and tell the whole truth, or you will get hurt."

"I am telling the truth. I do not know where she is. I believe that she left the place down yonder night before last with the Shropshire girl, and it is supposed that they came out this way; but I don't know what has become of them, and I was looking for them when you met me."

"Is this man speaking the truth?" queried Gray Gordon, as he raised his rifle. "Shall I believe him, or shall I shoot him down in his tracks?"

He was answered in an unexpected manner, and from an unexpected quarter.

A shrill scream was the first part of the answer, and the rest was furnished by a young woman who ran to the group from a covert at the side of the path, dropping an empty basket as she ran, and breathlessly placed herself between Mark and his captors.

"Don't shoot him!" she cried, as soon as she could get her breath. "Don't kill him! He's told the squar' an' honest truth, s'help me God!"

"And who do you happen to be, my dear?" inquired Gordon.

"I'm the Shrop hire gal that he spoke about. You won't kill him, will you?"

"What shall we do with him if we don't kill him?"

"I don't know—only please keep him away from Miss Talcott."

"Where is Miss Talcott, then?"

"Out here in the woods."

CHAPTER XXXII.

A SHARP AND SHORT CAMPAIGN.

GRAY GORDON and his two companions were not missed from the combined forces under the command of Colonel Crampton, as there were plenty of men without them.

A general council of war was held shortly after the junction of the two parties, and it was unanimously agreed that if they were not enough for the work they had to do, it would be idle to undertake it with an army.

Jerry Mabry, who had acted as guide for the Arkansas contingent, had gone with Gordon; but his place was fully supplied by Joe Stemmler, Colonel Crampton's scout, who either had more information than the other, or was more willing to impart or use it.

Indeed, it was pretty clear by this time that he had a grudge against the moonshiners, and against Colonel Rapp in particular, which he was willing to gratify without being scrupulous in regard to the means.

The wounded men were cared for by Colonel Crampton, the camp was duly guarded, and those who had lately been trying to kill each other lay down together to get as much sleep as the remainder of the night could give them.

Their common adversaries were in the mean time not idle.

A thorough knowledge of the ground enabled them to get without discovery near enough to the enemy's camp to gain a good idea of what was going on there, and to learn much of what was said, as well as most of what was done.

Two scouts who were sent down by Colonel Rapp returned safely, and both brought him substantially the same report.

It was to the effect that the parties who had been fighting each other in the early part of the evening had come together peaceably, and were preparing to make common cause against the defenders of the pass.

"So they failed to chew each other up, and they must have made a mistake when they came together and got into a skirmish," observed the old man. "Who are they all, anyhow?"

"Part of 'em," answered one of the scouts, "are huntin' horse-thieves, as they told us plainly, and we know well enough who they are arter. But that ain't the worst of it. The others are Uncle Sam's men, with Colonel Crampton at the head of 'em, and they are huntin' moonshiners."

"It is a bad business all through. I was hoping that they would clean each other out; but they don't seem to have made much progress in that way. Well, boys, as we have this trouble on our hands, the only thing for us to do is to fight it out, and it seems as if we ought to be able to keep off a regiment here. But I must say that I don't have much heart for this sort of a fight."

If Colonel Rapp could have known of the preparations that were being made by his foes, it is likely that he would have been yet more disheartened.

At daybreak they were astir, and soon the combined force were pushed forward according to a plan that had been carefully considered and well matured.

The marshal and his deputies, who had been accustomed to just that kind of work, proved themselves able to take advantage of every chance that offered, and their allies from Arkansas were all willing to profit by their experience and to emulate their achievements.

Sharpshooters were again sent up the rugged sides of the ravine to annoy the defenders of the pass, and at the same time their friends below moved forward cautiously under cover of the trees.

Before a shot had been fired on either side, Colonel Crampton hailed the enemy, and announced his rank and his intentions.

"My name is Crampton," said he, "and I am United States Marshal for this district. I am here to break up the unlawful still that I know to be up yonder, and to arrest the men who have been working it, and that is what I mean to do."

"My name is Abe Lassiter," put in the chief of the Arkansans, "and I have come here with some good men to hunt a gang of horse-thieves who have run into that hole with a lot of our horses, and we mean to get the men and the critturs, too."

"We have men enough to do what we came to do," urged the marshal, "and you had better surrender peaceably, as that will make it easier for all of you."

"Except the durned horse-thieves," muttered Lassiter.

"Talk is cheap," shouted Colonel Rapp at the top of his voice; "but it takes more than talk to get in here. We are honest people who have been bothered by thieves before now, and we don't know who you are and don't believe a word you say. We are well fixed here, and we mean to guard what's our own against any crowd that comes. So you had better all go away and keep out of trouble."

That ended the parley, and the business of fighting began in earnest.

The defenders of the pass were soon compelled to admit that the situation was more serious for them than it had yet been.

Joe Stemmer succeeded in establishing himself and two more of the marshal's deputies in a position on the heights at the flank of the moonshiners' fortification, if not a little in the rear of it.

Against this the moonshiners were forced to secure better cover, and while they were preparing it they were badly worried by the other sharpshooters.

Thus there was a fine opportunity for the men below, who had been steadily but cautiously advancing, and they did not fail to take advantage of it.

The post of the greatest glory and danger, however, was reserved for Ernst Kreutz, who had taken the idea into his head that he must then and there do something to distinguish himself and show his American friends how to make war.

Without giving any of his comrades an intimation of his intention, he disappeared at the side of the ravine, and wormed himself toward the fortification, covering his approach as well as he could with trees and bushes and broken ground, and proving himself an adept in the arts of sneaking and creeping.

Thus he succeeded in reaching the fortification just when its defenders were demoralized by the unexpected attack on their flank, and when a general charge had been ordered by Colonel Crampton.

At that moment he rose to his feet, scrambled up the log breastwork, shouted to his comrades to come on, and started a brisk fire at the enemy with his beloved yager.

The attempt was pretty much like that of the Swiss hero, Arnold von Winkelried, and was attended by somewhat similar results.

The astonished moonshiners immediately shot down the daring leader of the storming party, and he tumbled over on their side of the fortification; but he had done some damage before he fell, and his comrades, inspired by the "break" he had made, rushed forward to rescue him or avenge his death.

The rush was made just at the right time, and was thoroughly successful, carrying everything before it.

The attacking party swarmed over the barricades in a hurry, and the defenders of the pass were taken at a decided disadvantage.

Early in the morning Mrs. Shropshire had been notified of the serious character of the impending engagement, and her belligerent feelings had been at once aroused.

Seizing a rifle, and buckling on a belt of cartridges, she hastened down the pass to the assistance of the old he wolf and the two cubs.

She reached the scene of action just when Ernst Kreutz had shot down Enoch Shropshire, and her bullet was the first that hit the daring German and brought him down from his perch.

Directly afterward she shared the fate of her husband and the man who killed him, and then the assailants came pouring over the barricade, and the fight was practically at an end.

A few of the defenders made a stand which soon degenerated into a running fight; but most of them who were not killed or badly wounded, scampered away and attempted to escape.

Both sides had suffered pretty severely in the brief but bloody combat at the barricade; but Colonel Crampton and Abe Lassiter, without stopping just then to consider the needs of friend or foe, urged their men on, and pushed forward in pursuit of the runaways.

This speedy and energetic movement resulted in the capture of Bob and Ben Shropshire and three of the moonshiners, leaving but few to be accounted for.

It also put the victors in possession of the two log-houses and the still and the entire camp of the moonshiners, and when this was effected, and their prisoners were secured, they were at liberty to look about them.

With Colonel Crampton the claims of humanity were just then superior to every other consideration, and he hastened down the pass to the barricade, when he met a portion of his men who had been doing duty on the heights, and with their assistance he gave the wounded of both sides all the attention that was possible, carrying them up to the log buildings where they could be better cared for.

The Arkansans in the mean time had found and recognized their stolen horses, and were eager to execute immediate justice—or vengeance—upon the two remaining members of the horse-stealing family.

To this there could be no reasonable objection, as the offenders had been caught with the stolen property in their possession, and the unwritten law of the land punished horse-stealing with death.

Neither Bob Shropshire nor his younger brother protested against the infliction of this penalty when their captors informed them of the fate that awaited them.

"You've killed Pap and Maw," declared Bob, "and now I don't keer a durn what becomes o' me."

Bob being in such a considerate frame of mind, and Ben remaining sullen and silent, it was decided by the Arkansans that the hanging should go on, and the two young men were being led out with ropes when Colonel Crampton came back with the wounded.

"What's this?" he demanded. "What are you doing with those men?"

"That's all right, colonel," answered Abe Lassiter. "These are the hoss-thieves, what's left of them. We found our critturs here, and you know what that means."

"Well, I don't know that it's any of my business. They are your game, and you caught them, and I suppose you know what you are about. You take the responsibility, and I wash my hands of the whole business."

"All right, colonel. You won't be bothered about it in any way."

The Arkansans took their victims out of sight of the marshal and his men, and in a few moments the remaining members of the Shropshire family were choked out of existence, a melancholy but forcible warning to others of their class.

To parody Scripture to suit the Arkansas doctrine, "They who take the horse shall perish by the halter."

Colonel Crampton inquired what had become of the third colonel, Colonel Rapp; but the prisoners either did not know, or professed not to know what had become of him.

He had simply disappeared, and his comrades declared that they had seen nothing of him since they began the flight from behind the barricade.

"What, then, has become of the young lady who was here?" demanded Colonel Bastrop, who had been searching in vain for Eva Talcott.

The moonshiner sentry who saw the ghost happened to be one of the prisoners, and he was willing to give evidence on this point.

He told when and how the disappearance of Eva Talcott and Linda Shropshire had been discovered, and related his adventures and the conclusion at which his comrades had arrived concerning it, pointing out the pass by which they must have escaped, and adding that Mark Hannafin had gone out that way to seek for them.

"You see how it is, father," said Lawrence Bastrop. "If I had gone with Mr. Gordon and Gerald, as I wanted to, I would have been in the right place to look for her; but now they have all the chance."

"Let us hope that they may improve it, my boy. We have the satisfaction of knowing that we have kept our end up well."

"If the young lady has gone out that way," remarked Colonel Crampton, "the man I want must have gone out that way, too, and I must get him if possible, as he is the head and front of the offending here. Come on, Louis, and we will find all who are missing."

The marshal detailed a sufficient number of his men for this purpose, and led them into the little pass, with Colonel Bastrop and Lawrence.

CHAPTER XXXIII. A SHOT IN REVENGE.

GRAY GORDON could have jumped for joy at the unexpected and most welcome information that came from the lips of Linda Shropshire, and Gerald Talcott was so startled that he actually did jump.

"And so Miss Talcott is out here in the woods," remarked Gordon. "I hope that she is safe and well."

"She is all right, mister," answered Linda, "except that she has hurt her foot. You are her friends, I hope."

"Indeed we are, and this young gentleman is her brother."

"She has told me of him, and seems to me that he does kinder favor her."

"Lead the way, then, my good girl, and we will get to her and help her as soon as possible. If you have proved yourself a friend to her, I assure you that you shall lose nothing by that. I must ask you to accompany us, Mr. Hannafin. If we find the young lady safe and sound, we have no wish to harm you, whatever your intentions may have been; but you must not try to get away from us."

Mark Hannafin acquiesced in silence, and sullenly walked away with his captors, Gordon taking the lead with Linda Shropshire, and Jerry Mabry bringing up the rear.

On the way, though they all traveled as fast as the nature of the ground would allow them to, Linda found opportunity to give an account of the escape of herself and her friend, and to relate what had happened to them since they left the camp of the moonshiners, concluding with the statement that she had been on her way to bring help to Miss Talcott when she met Gordon and the others.

Eva was greatly surprised at the speedy return of her friend; but that was nothing to her joyful surprise at the sight of Gerald and Gordon.

Forgetting her injured ankle for the moment, she threw herself into the arms of her brother, shedding tears of love and gratitude, and thanking Heaven for this most welcome deliverance.

"I knew that you would come, Gerald!" she exclaimed. "I knew that you were both

alive, and was sure that you would search for me!"

"How did you know that, Eva?" gently inquired Gerald.

"An old man down there told me about you, and he described you both to me very clearly. He accused you of being thieves, but of course I could not believe that."

"Gerald, we owe Colonel Rapp a good turn for that," remarked Gordon. "Miss Talcott, and this individual"—pointing at Mark Hannafin—"know that we were alive?"

"I do not believe he did. It seemed to me that I frightened him pretty badly when I told him that I was expecting my brother. He supposed that he had made an end of Gerald."

"How do you know that?"

"I heard him say so. At least, he admitted as much when I overheard him talking to his friend who came ashore with us."

This statement was evidently a surprise to Hannafin, but not a shock, as he seemed to have got beyond being shocked, and he merely hung his head and was silent.

"We know that to be a fact, Miss Talcott," said Gordon; "but your brother and I have agreed to forgive this young man his offenses. We understand that he saved your life, or helped to save it, and all's well that ends well, you know."

"It is ending better than I could have hoped it would, though I have been greatly sustained and comforted by the belief that Gerald was alive. But I am anxious to know what happened to him, and how he was saved."

"Mr. Gordon saved my life," put in Gerald. "I was knocked into the river from the Howena, and would have drowned there if he had not plunged in to help me. He aided me to reach the shore, and has since been my best friend and support. I owe him my life and more than my life."

"I am very grateful to you, Mr. Gordon," said Eva, "and I would like to be allowed to love you as a father."

"Nothing would please me better than that, my dear Miss Talcott, and I hope that you will try to do so. But I must leave you now, as there are yet some important matters to be attended to here. Our friends are trying to get into the den of the moonshiners down yonder, and I must do what I can to help them at this end. It will not be worth while at present to seek help at that farm-house, as you will be able, Gerald, with the help of Jerry Mabry, to get your sister down to the place where we met her friend. Yet I would be glad to have Jerry with me, and if I could trust this young man—"

"You may trust me thoroughly," answered Mark Hannafin, who had by this time become quite broken down and repentant. "There is no more harm in me, I assure you."

"I will trust you, then, to do what you can to repair the mischief you have already done. Come, Jerry."

Since he had found the trail which he sought, all was plain sailing for Jerry Mabry, and he easily guided his employer down into the little pass through which Eva Talcott and Linda Shropshire had escaped.

As they entered it they heard no reports of shots from below, nor any other sounds to cause them to believe that fighting was going on there, though they were surely near enough to hear them if they were to be heard.

Either their friends had gained a victory, or had abandoned for a time the attempt to force a way into the den of the moonshiners.

As it could not be supposed that the barricades had been carried so soon, the latter supposition was the more probable, and in that event it would be necessary for the two scouts to move very cautiously, lest they should fall into the hands of their foes.

They did move cautiously and as silently as possible, and had got about half-way down the glen when they caught sight of a man coming toward them.

That is to say, he was not coming toward them just at that moment, as he had halted and was looking back in the direction from which he had come.

"Hide, Jerry!" ordered Gordon. "It is Colonel Rapp."

Jerry dropped down behind a rock, and Gordon got behind a tree, and they awaited further developments.

Colonel Rapp walked a little distance further down the pass, and then turned and looked back again.

If the assailing party had really succeeded in capturing the position down there, and if he was trying to escape, he must surely be crazy to act in that way, and on a closer view of his wild looks and aimless methods Gordon was forced to believe that his mind was really off its balance.

As he started forward again, the sound of voices was heard below, and some men came in sight, headed by Colonel Crampton.

"Here he is, boys!" shouted the marshal. "Hurry up and take him! Better surrender peaceably, colonel, and don't make any more trouble."

Colonel Rapp had raised his rifle, and had

turned as if to face and defy his pursuers, when Gordon stepped out from behind his tree, and Jerry Mabry arose from behind his rock.

"You had better surrender, colonel," entreated Gordon, "and I give you my word as a gentleman that I will pull you out of this trouble."

Again the fugitive turned, and his eyes blazed as they lighted on this new installment of his foes.

"Who gave you the right to call yourself a gentleman?" he fiercely demanded. "You are a thief, and I know you to be a thief. What is your word worth? Not the shaving of a straw. I will make an end of you, anyhow, you dirty rascal!"

"Don't shoot me!" shouted Gordon, as the other raised his rifle. "Don't shoot me, Jim Hannafin! I am your friend, and want to help you."

"There it goes again! Here is another of them! I am no Hannafin. Do you want to drive me crazy? Oh, but I'll settle you!"

He raised his rifle and fired; but Gordon had quickly dodged behind his tree.

Colonel Crampton and his men, not so much surprised by what had happened beyond them as interested in the event, were moving up the pass silently and swiftly, expecting to make the chief moonshiner a captive before he could do any damage.

Hardly had he fired at Gordon when a shot came from that quarter, and he fell without a cry, face upward on the ground.

It is to be hoped that no recording angel took note of the oath that burst from Colonel Crampton's lips when he perceived that unnecessary act of brutality.

"Who fired that shot?" he demanded.

Nobody answered; but the smoking rifle of Joe Stemmler and the looks of his comrades told the story.

"I will settle with you for firing without orders. If you have killed that man, you shall suffer for it."

It seemed that Colonel Rapp was surely dead, as he lay there motionless, and blood on his forehead showed where the bullet had struck.

Gordon and Jerry Mabry hastened to him, and so did the others.

"The shot was fired in revenge," said Colonel Crampton. "That wretch had a grudge against the man, and has shot him down, though he knew that I wanted to take him alive. He shall pay for this."

CHAPTER XXXIV.

RESTORED TO LIFE.

COLONEL CRAMPTON and Gray Gordon was quick to give their attention to the prostrate man, examining his wound and doing all in their power to restore him to life.

"I hope he is not dead, colonel," said Gordon. "I would not have that happen for anything you could gain by this raid."

"I hope so, too," answered the marshal. "Perhaps the bullet has only creased his skull. Leave him to me, and I will soon tell you."

"How did you get here, Mr. Gordon?" demanded Colonel Bastrop as he came up with his son Lawrence. "Where is Gerald?"

"He is up yonder in the woods with Miss Talcott. She is safe and well, and you will soon see her."

This was great news for the Louisianians, and they were content to wait.

Colonel Rapp, greatly to the amazement of the man who was manipulating his wound, suddenly rose to a sitting posture, and the first object his eyes rested on was Gray Gordon, who was standing before him with his rifle in his hand.

At first he seemed to be dazed, but directly he spoke as if he had full control of his faculties.

"Well, Holcomb, you shot me," said he; "but I think you aimed a trifle too high. I deserved it, as I tried to take an unfair advantage of you, and I know that I had done you a great wrong. Are you satisfied now?"

"I am more than satisfied now, Jim," answered Gordon.

"What do you mean?" demanded Colonel Crampton. "That man did not shoot you, Colonel Rapp."

"Don't give me any nonsense, whoever you are. Who are these people, Holcomb, and how did they get here. I thought I saw my wife out there a minute ago. Hello! this place seems strange to me. What does it all mean?"

"It means," said the marshal, "that I arrest you, Colonel Rapp, on the charge of manufacturing whisky contrary to the laws of the United States."

"Oh, don't give me any such nonsense as that. Who is your Colonel Rapp? I am Jim Hannafin, a gay gambler, and never have anything to do with whisky, outside of the samples I get in the towns and on the boats. What does it mean, anyhow?"

"It means, Jim Hannafin," solemnly replied Gordon, "that you have been dead these many years, and have just come to life."

Colonel Crampton, perceiving the earnest tone and dignified manner of his ally, began to be-

lieve that he was somehow astray, and he also wanted to know what it all meant.

"Is there a real mystery here, Mr. Gordon?" he demanded, "or are you manufacturing a mystery for my benefit?"

"I will tell you the plain truth," answered Gordon, "and will leave you to draw your own conclusions. This man's real name is Hannafin, and years ago he was a gambler on the river. So was I. When I was living at Cincinnati he did me a great wrong, and I met him in the night near Covington and compelled him to fight a duel with me. As he says, he attempted to take an unfair advantage of me; but I shot him and left him for dead."

"I have since learned that he was struck as he has been to-day, and that he recovered, but has never since been the same man that he was before. His past life was forgotten, and he no longer knew his wife and child. He left them, and began a new life as Colonel Rapp, believing that to be his name."

"At last, in some manner which I leave the physicians to explain, though presume that the circumstance is not an unusual one, his consciousness has been restored, and he takes up his former life where he left it. Whatever he may have done in the moonshining way was done by Colonel Rapp, who no longer exists, and I submit to you Colonel Crampton, that James Hannafin is not responsible for it."

The marshal pondered this problem a little while, and then assented to the position assumed by Gordon.

Doubtless he was glad to find a way of avoiding the performance of an unpleasant duty.

"I believe you are right about that," said he, "and under the circumstances I would not be justified in holding the man. But if I let him go, I ought not to keep these other men, and so I shall turn them all loose. Of course I must destroy the still, and I shall give them all fair warning not to do so any more."

"I think you will be doing a just as well as a merciful deed," interposed Colonel Bastrop.

"More equity than law about it, though, I am afraid, and I don't know how I shall explain the affair in my report. Perhaps the easiest way will be to say nothing about it."

"Do you want to haul me over the coals for firing that shot?" inquired Joe Stemmler.

"You deserve it, and that's a fact; but all's well that ends well, and you happened to send a bullet just where it was needed, and so we will call it square."

The marshal and his men set at work to demolish and utterly destroy the illicit still and its product on hand and all the materials and utensils connected with it.

James Hannafin, late Colonel Rapp, who seemed to have taken a special fancy to Crampton, watched this operation as if it was a matter in which he could never have had any possible interest.

Though he was, to all appearance, fully conscious and wide-awake to everything about him, it was equally apparent that he was somewhat mystified by the position in which he found himself, and that every now and then something cropped up to daze and stagger him.

While the marshal was attending to his duties Gray Gordon was on his way, with Colonel Bastrop and Lawrence, to seek Eva Talcott.

They found her at the appointed place, whither she had been brought by Gerald with the assistance of Mark Hannafin, who seemed disposed to do all in his power to atone for his past misdeeds.

She was overjoyed at meeting Colonel Bastrop and greeted Lawrence with a blush that was to him a good augury of more intimate relations in the future.

"It was very kind of you to come and search for me, my friends," said she, "and I do not know how I can sufficiently thank you."

"We are more than repaid by finding you alive and well," answered the old gentleman. "Of course you understand that your mother sent us, though we were glad to come, and I believe that when you reach Memphis you will find your mother there."

"Indeed! That seems almost too good to be true."

"I had a dispatch from her, just before we left Memphis, telling me that she had heard from Gerald, and that she was coming on."

"I have some good news for you, Mr. Hannafin," said Gordon.

"What can that be, sir?" inquired Mark.

"When you go back down yonder with us, you will find somebody that you have missed for a long time. Your father is restored to you."

"Are you speaking of Colonel Rapp?"

"Of the man who has been known as Colonel Rapp, but is so no longer, as he is now James Hannafin. He has met with an accident—perhaps I should say with another accident—and has come back to his old self. All's well that ends well, you see."

It is easier to tell good news than bad news, and Gordon found it a difficult matter to inform Linda Shropshire of the destruction of her family; but it had to be done, and he endeavored to do it with as little shock as possible.

He addressed himself to Eva, knowing well that Linda's ears would take in all he said.

"There has been much trouble, Miss Talcott, down there at the place you left. A party of men who were hunting moonshiners came there with a party who were hunting horse-thieves, and they were bound to get in. They did get in after a hard fight, and of course some people were killed in the fight."

"Was my folks killed?" inquired Linda.

"Your mother took a gun and rushed into the fight like a man, and she and your father were killed where the fighting was hardest. Your brothers escaped there, but were killed further up by some of the men who were hunting horse-thieves."

He was careful not to say that they had been taken and hanged.

Linda hung her head for a moment; but, if she shed any tears, they were "dry" tears.

She had so long lived under the shadow of her family, that it must have been something like a relief to her to emerge from it.

"That's jest what I've been lookin' fur this long time," said she, "and I'm only glad it wasn't hangin'. We've been a set o' boss-thieves, and we all deserved hangin' long ago. It's my turn now. We was all boss-thieves together. As you didn't git a chance to shoot me, you'll have to hang me."

"Nobody wants to shoot you or hang you, Linda dear," said Eva Talcott, "and you shall not be harmed in any way."

"I don't know what'll become of me, then, now that the rest of 'em's gone."

"You shall go to my mother's house with me, Linda, and there you will find a better home and better friends than you have yet known."

The party proceeded—Eva journeying in the litter that had been prepared for her by her brother and Mark Hannafin—down to the recent camp of the moonshiners, where Colonel Crampton had completed the destruction of the distillers' apparatus, and prepared for immediate departure.

The captured moonshiners had already been sent off, to go whither they pleased, and for the rest there were plenty of horses.

So they set out, the Arkansas people going directly home, and the others aiming to strike the river at the nearest point where they would be likely to get a boat to take them to Memphis.

On the way the late Colonel Rapp was gradually initiated into his new existence, much of the information he needed being furnished by his son, though Gray Gordon assisted materially, thus gaining the friendship of the resurrected man.

CHAPTER XXXV.

A VENGEFUL WOMAN.

MRS. TALCOTT followed her dispatch to Colonel Bastrop as soon as she could get away, and in due course of time reached Memphis.

There she began as soon as possible to make inquiries concerning the friends who had preceded her, as well as concerning her missing children, but without any signal success, as neither Gerald and his party nor Colonel Bastrop and his party had made any public declaration of their intentions or departure.

A woman, and especially a woman who had spent much of her life in the country, could not readily transform herself into a detective bureau, even though possessing the advantages which Mrs. Talcott's undeniable position would give her, and considerable time was required to put herself in communication with people who might be useful to her.

She discovered the hotel at which Gordon and Gerald had stopped, and that which had harbored Colonel Bastrop and his son, and at the former she decided to put up, though she was careful to leave her address at the latter.

While she was pursuing her inquiries and awaiting developments, she happened to run across one of the survivors of the Rowena disaster, who was no other than Hank Byers, who had given Gordon and Gerald the information that sent them across the river.

Since that time Byers had met Silas Birch, who had safely emerged from the Shropshire complication, and made his way to Memphis, and Birch had imparted to him some intelligence which he did not hesitate to communicate to Mrs. Talcott, perceiving that she was a lady and in distress.

"The truth is, Mrs. Talcott," said he, "that I am afraid that Mark Hannafin, though he may be credited with saving your daughter's life, does not mean well by her, unless an intention to make her his wife may be considered as meaning well. It is for that purpose, I judge, that he has taken her out of the way, instead of bringing her here."

"That is very sad news for me, Mr. Byers," intimated the lady.

"Well, ma'am, I think that your daughter may have been saved from any such difficulty as that by your son and his friend, to say nothing of those who must have gone over there after them. There is another point that I can give you, and perhaps it may be useful to you, though I must admit that I don't like to meddle with such matters as these."

"I will be more than grateful, Mr. Byers, for any information you may give me."

"The fact is, Mrs. Talcott, that Mark Hannafin's mother is here in Memphis. She has been

living here for some time, and I don't believe that she would support her son in any such scheme as he seems to have gone into. Mr. Gordon called on her before he left Memphis, and I have an idea that he got some useful points from her."

"Is she a—a lady?"

"I suppose she is not what you would call a lady, as she owns and runs a gambling-house; but she is a good woman outside of that, and it seems to me that it would do you no harm to call and see her."

"She would not be likely to murder me," observed Mrs. Talcott with a smile.

"I don't believe that she would be inclined to do any bodily harm to any person."

The lady was naturally anxious to do anything and everything that might allay her anxiety and bring her information concerning her children, and so she was conducted by Hank Byers to the same house at which he had previously introduced Gray Gordon.

Of course she was not taken into the gambling rooms as Gordon had been—indeed, the establishment was not in running order at that hour—but was ushered into a handsome parlor, where Mrs. Hannafin received her alone.

The two women seated themselves, and mentally took stock of each other after the manner of women.

Mrs. Talcott had a faint remembrance of the man Hannafin, but had no reason to suppose that this bearer of the name had been tangled up in her past life; while Mrs. Hannafin knew all about Mrs. Talcott, and could easily guess what had brought her there.

The lady from Louisiana explained the purpose of her visit, telling as much of her story as she cared to tell, and tried to come as gently as possible to the real point of the matter.

She had been given to understand, she said, that Mrs. Hannafin's son had saved the life of Eva Talcott, but had then carried her away with the view of marrying her.

"Who told you that?" abruptly demanded Mrs. Hannafin.

"The man who brought me here," answered the other, surprised at this harsh and uncompromising tone.

"He must be a fool."

"Possibly, though he did not seem so to me, and he told me that he had his information from a friend of your son's, who helped him carry my daughter to the shore, who left him there and returned to Memphis, and to whom he had declared his intentions."

"Your information is all wrong, madam. Whatever Mark Hannafin's intention may be, it is not that. If I supposed that a son of mine could so far forget himself as to think of making a daughter of yours his wife, I would follow him and kill him, if I could stop the scheme in no other way."

"Indeed! I do not understand you."

"Do you suppose that I would allow my son to marry the daughter of the man who killed his father?"

"The man who killed his father! What can you mean? Why, Colonel Talcott—"

"I am not speaking of any Colonel Talcott, but of Josiah Holcomb."

"He is dead," answered the widow, as her face fell.

"But his evil deed lives after him. He killed my husband, and I saw him do it. As you are the first of the race that I have had a chance to get even with, I mean to get even with you."

Mrs. Hannafin gave point to this statement by producing a silver mounted revolver.

"Do you mean to murder me?" demanded the lady from Louisiana.

"You may call it that if you wish. Your husband murdered my husband, and was never punished for the deed."

"Are you sure that Mr. Holcomb killed your husband?"

Voices were heard in the passage leading to the parlor.

"All right," said one voice. "I will find the way now."

"Somebody is coming, and I must make an end of you right now!" fiercely exclaimed Mrs. Hannafin. "I am sure that your husband destroyed the life of James Hannafin, and that he is forever lost to me."

The door was opened quickly, and in stepped the man who had been known as Colonel Rapp.

He seized the belligerent Mrs. Hannafin in a loving embrace, putting a sudden stop to her warlike intentions, and spoke to her in tones that were full of affection.

"Who is lost to you? Not I, you may be sure. I was lost, but have found myself at last, and have come home to you, Clara, to begin life again."

"Is it really you, Jim? What does this mean?"

"I will explain it to you after a while, with Mark's help. This is Mrs. Talcott, I suppose, as I heard that she was here. Madam, you will find your daughter and son at your hotel, where I left them a little while ago, and I wish you joy of the meeting."

"Thank you, sir; I will go to them at once," and Mrs. Talcott hurried away.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

THE OLD LOVE.

MRS. TALCOTT found her children at the hotel, as she had been assured she would, and there was a joyful reunion, which was participated in by Colonel Bastrop and his son.

When they had put her in possession of the main points of their several stories by answering her eager questions, Gray Gordon and Linda Shropshire were called in and introduced to the widow.

"This is the gentleman," said Gerald, "who saved my life and has since been more than a friend to me. If it had not been for his help we would not both be here now."

"And this," said Eva, "is Linda Shropshire, who was a friend to me when I sorely needed a friend. She has lost all her family, and I have told her that she shall go home with me, and that we will take care of her."

"Indeed she shall," asserted Mrs. Talcott, "and we will do our best to help her to lead a pleasant and useful life. As for Mr. Gordon, I can only thank him, as I know that I can never repay him for his goodness to me and mine."

"If I can have your esteem," answered Gordon, "with that of your son and daughter, I shall consider myself amply repaid."

"You have more than our esteem," broke in Eva. "Gerald and I both love you as if we were your own children, and we wish that we might never lose you."

"I can surely ask nothing better than that," he said with a smile.

The next day, while Eva was out shopping for herself and Linda, and Gerald had gone for a stroll with Lawrence Bastrop, and Colonel Bastrop was attending to the purchase of tickets and other arrangements for the return trip, Gray Gordon and Mrs. Talcott had a long talk at the hotel, in the course of which they became quite friendly and confidential.

The conversation which naturally began with the adventures of Gordon and Gerald on the other side of the river, finally reached Mrs. Talcott's adventure in Memphis, when she was rescued from a dangerous situation by the timely arrival of Mrs. Hannafin's husband.

"I had known," said Gordon, "before Gerald and I went to search for your daughter, that the man over there who called himself Colonel Rapp was Mrs. Hannafin's husband; but I would never have supposed that she would try to avenge herself upon you for an act of which you were entirely innocent."

"Perhaps I was not so innocent, after all, as it was through my fault that my husband got into that difficulty. I must inform you, Mr. Gordon, that I have been twice married. My husband at that time was named Josiah Holcomb, and he was a gambler."

"Indeed! I would not have supposed—"

"Nor would I, if you will pardon me for interrupting you. I did not know that I had married a gambler, and had no cause to suspect it until the truth was forced upon me. My husband had carefully kept me in ignorance of his real occupation, and we lived happily in Cincinnati with my two children whom you know, and who were then infants, until James Hannafin, one of my husband's friends, came to me in a fit of spite and informed me of the wrong that had been done me. He also proved it by a letter of my husband's."

"Your husband had treated you shamefully," observed Gordon.

"So I believed at the time, not reflecting, as I afterward did, that his deception had been caused by his love for me, and that he had always been a most affectionate husband and father. I had been very strictly brought up, was a church member, and was proud of my position in society. I only thought of the deception that had been practiced on me, and of the disgrace to me and my children if the truth should be made public. I left my husband's house almost immediately with my children, taking care to hide where he could not find me if he should seek me."

"Did he seek you?"

"I believe that he was too proud for that; but he of course learned who was responsible for the breaking up of his family, and I now know how he punished his false friend. I wished that he had sought and found me, as I need hardly say to you that I bitterly repented of my rash act."

"What became of your husband?" inquired Gordon.

"He went to California, as I was informed, and died there."

"Are you sure that he died there?"

The widow was startled and greatly agitated by this question, and stared at the querist as if she had received a shock that stunned her.

"Am I sure?" she repeated. "I believed that I was sure. I was told so, and my information appeared to be on good authority. No doubt had ever occurred to me. What sort of a man are you, Mr. Gordon? There is something strange about you, and I cannot make it out. What do you mean by asking me such a question?"

"I mean no harm, Mrs. Talcott, and I do not wish to make any mystery of the matter. The plain truth is that I was acquainted with Josiah

Holcomb on the Pacific Coast. Indeed, he was my partner, and we grew rich there together."

"At gambling?" feebly inquired Mrs. Talcott.

"Well, ma'am, speculation in mines and mining stocks does not go by the name of gambling, though I must admit that it requires more of a gambler's skill and shrewdness than any other game I know of, and there is vastly more to be won or lost on what may be called the turn of a card. After all, the strong point of the game is found in knowing when to quit, and Holcomb and I dropped out in good time."

"Was that the extent of the gambling?"

"There was nothing else worth mentioning."

"Did Mr. Holcomb ever speak of his past—of his family?"

"Quite freely, and I knew his entire history. He felt quite sore over the manner in which his family had been broken up, and I never heard him regret the punishment he had inflicted on the false friend who ruined his home."

"Yet he must have blamed his wife for it all."

"He did not. Though he was greatly grieved, and wished that she might have waited to give him a chance to speak and act for himself, he did not blame her, as he knew that he had deceived her most shamefully. His one desire then was to become the possessor of a fortune, which he wished to take to his wife and children, hoping that she would finally forgive him."

"Forgive him?" exclaimed Mrs. Talcott. "How gladly would she have done so, if she had had the chance! He secured the fortune I presume."

"He did."

"And then he died?"

"He did not die then, and to the best of my knowledge and belief he has not died since then."

"Mr. Gordon!"

"I am sure that he was alive and well less than a month ago."

Mrs. Talcott's color came and went as her agitation increased.

"Do you realize what you are telling me?" she demanded. "If you are not mistaken about that, my marriage to Colonel Talcott was unlawful."

"Perhaps it was, strictly speaking; but you were not to blame for that, and there has been no harm done. Josiah Holcomb understands it all, and he would be the last person in the world to find fault with you."

"It seems to me, Mr. Gordon, that I have done him a great wrong, for which I can never sufficiently atone. When and where can I see him, if at all?"

"He is very anxious to meet you, and he commissioned me to make inquiries and learn whether you would be willing to receive him. I was on my way down the river for that purpose when I met your son and daughter, and the series of events began that brought us so near together."

"Now that you have seen them and me, Mr. Gordon, what will you say to him?"

"I shall tell him, if I have your permission, to visit you at your home, and I am sure that he will joyfully hasten to do so."

"You have more than my permission—my earnest entreaty that you will add this to your other acts of kindness. But what will be done about my marriage to Colonel Talcott?"

"As he is dead, that can be easily arranged, I presume. But I would advise you, until you see Mr. Holcomb or hear from him, to refrain from mentioning the matter to your children or to anybody else."

"I shall gratefully be guided by your judgment, Mr. Gordon."

As all had been said upon this vital matter that needed to be said, further conversation might then have been embarrassing to both; but the difficulty was avoided by the arrival of Eva and Linda, quietly followed by Gerald and Lawrence.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

A REAL REUNION.

THE next day the Talcotts and the Bastrops, accompanied by Linda Shropshire, sped swiftly away on their homeward journey.

Gray Gordon was left behind in Memphis, and in the evening he and Colonel Crampton called at Mrs. Hannafin's, where they made a long visit, but did not "tackle" the faro game or any other game.

The results of the visit, however, seemed to be quite satisfactory to those concerned, and there was a friendly parting all around.

A happier family party than the Talcotts it would be hard to find, and their rejoicings over their reunion were lively enough to drive from Linda Shropshire the sad thoughts that afflicted her since her family was swept out of existence.

The only drawback to their pleasure, at least in the minds of the young people, was found in the fact that they were not accompanied by Gray Gordon, to whom Gerald had taken a great fancy, and who was also highly admired by Eva.

They were inclined, in a teasing way, to find fault with their mother for not having given Mr. Gordon a sufficiently strenuous and press-

ing invitation to compel him to accompany them to Talcott's Landing or to visit them there shortly.

"I believe I have done all that I could properly do," she answered, and then she blushed like a girl.

"Just look at me!" exclaimed Eva. "I do believe that she has fallen in love with Mr. Gordon, herself."

"I only wish that she had," responded Gerald. "It is not only because he saved my life that I am fond of him; but I never met a man that I cottoned to so completely, and I have had a good chance to find him out, I can tell you. I would be more than glad to get hold of him and keep him in one way or another, and it would suit me 'way down to the ground to be step-fathered by him."

"You ought not to talk slang, Gerald, and neither of you should speak as you do," sternly observed Mrs. Talcott; but then she blushed again.

During the remainder of the journey she was strangely preoccupied, and after they reached their home she seemed to be so different from her usual self that the difference was noticed.

Though as kind and careful as ever, and never more affectionate in her manner toward her children, it was evident that she had thoughts of her own in which they were not allowed to share, and frequently she sunk into a reverie from which she did not care to be roused.

Gerald and Eva said nothing to her about the change in her demeanor; but to each other they commented upon it freely.

"I believe that ma is thinking of Mr. Gordon," observed Eva. "When his name is mentioned, it seems to affect her so strangely."

"I will tell you a bit of a secret about him," answered Gerald. "Just before we left Memphis he told me that a friend of his would be coming down this way before long, and that he expected to accompany him, and might then visit us."

"Maybe ma knows of it, too, and that is what she is looking forward to."

So matters went on until ten days had passed since the return to Talcott's Landing, and then a letter came to Mrs. Talcott which Gerald scrutinized with lively curiosity as he brought it from the little post-office.

It was in a man's handwriting, and the post-mark was Memphis.

Mrs. Talcott took it to her own apartment where she read it privately, and she made no mention of it to either of her children; but she was evidently agitated, and her agitation increased as the time for the arrival of the semi-weekly packet approached.

Two days after the arrival of the letter, brought the packet, and Gerald was at the landing as usual, with most of the people of the neighborhood, white and black.

Only one passenger got off at Talcott's Landing—a middle-aged gentleman, tall, fine-looking, handsomely-dressed, and of really distinguished appearance, in whom Gerald might have found it difficult to recognize Gray Gordon, if that gentleman had not approached him with outstretched hand and smiling face.

"Why, Gerald, have you forgotten me so soon? I should think that comrades in such a campaign as we went through would remember each other for a while."

"Forgotten you?" exclaimed Gerald. "Indeed I have not forgotten you, and I never could; but I was wondering whether it was really you, and I am hardly sure yet. There is such a change in you."

"Only a change in clothes. Fine feathers make fine birds, you know."

"I hope that you have come to stay with us a long time," suggested Gerald, as he noticed the passenger's nobby valise.

"I have come to look you up, as you see, but my stay may depend on circumstances."

"If I could control the circumstances, you would never leave us."

At the house, while Gerald and his sister welcomed the guest most heartily, and made much of him, Mrs. Talcott also welcomed him, but in a quieter way, and was strangely reserved and timid in his presence, so different from her usual stately self that the young people began to fear that something was wrong.

It was left for Gordon to dispel the shade of embarrassment that had settled on the party.

"If you will excuse me, young people," said he, "I would like to see your mother alone for a few minutes. I have a business message of importance to communicate to her."

Gerald and Eva exchanged significant glances as they left the room.

"This is getting on pretty fast," observed the latter.

"Yes," answered Gerald, "and I suppose that mother can control the circumstances he spoke of."

"It is a clear case of love at first sight."

"That is where the queerness comes in."

It was very doubtful at that moment whether Mrs. Talcott would prove able to control herself.

The color came and went in her face when she found herself alone with Gordon, and she scarcely raised her eyes to look at him.

"Can you guess my message?" he softly inquired.

"Is it about your friend?" she murmured. "You told me that he was to come with you. Where is Mr.—Mr. Holcomb?"

"He did come with me. He is here. He stands before you. Do you not know me yet?"

The next instant she was in his arms, and the old love was thoroughly renewed.

"I knew you when I met you in Memphis," she said. "Not at first—not right away—but when you told me the story of your friend I no longer had any doubt."

"Why did you keep your knowledge to yourself?"

"I waited for you to declare yourself in your own way. Now you have done so, and you must never leave me again. But what shall we do about it?"

"I have settled that. My name is Gordon now. All my property is held in that name, and I prefer to be known by it. Marry me, and become Mrs. Gordon, and we need tell our secret to nobody."

"Except the children," she suggested.

"Except the children, of course, and perhaps one or two special friends. If it should leak out in the course of time, it will not be very startling."

So it was settled, and so it was.

Gerald and Eva were more rejoiced than surprised by the turn the affair had taken, and the little gossip that arose soon died away, the gossips agreeing that the affection of the young Talcotts for their stepfather was something marvelous.

As Eva was by that time engaged to Lawrence Bastrop, it was necessary to let him into the family secret, and he took an unfair advantage of it in pressing her for a speedy marriage.

"As your pa and ma have gone and got married," said he, "it would be a shocking instance of disrespect on our part to hesitate any longer about following their example."

Of course Eva could not be guilty of disrespect to her parents, and so there was another wedding, and a more brilliant one, at Talcott's Landing.

When Jim Hannafin attempted to take up his tools, he discovered that he was no longer fitted for it; that his hands had lost their cunning, and that gambling had lost its attraction for him.

As he was unwilling to live on the proceeds of his wife's "business," and as she was quite willing to abandon it and enter a more reputable occupation, he purchased, with the assistance of Gray Gordon, a tract of land near Talcott's Landing, and settled down as a planter.

Mark Hannafin settled down on the land with his parents, and took a lively interest in Linda Shropshire, who had developed into a handsome young woman, and who had gained largely in every way by her association with her new friends.

At one time he feared that Gerald Talcott might be his rival; but Linda's preference for him was so manifest that he asked her to change her name to his, and she readily consented.

THE END.

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